

8-1-2015

Creating the Black California Dream: Virna Canson and the Black Freedom Struggle in the Golden State's Capital, 1940-1988

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.34917/7777302>

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CREATING THE BLACK CALIFORNIA DREAM: VIRNA CANSON AND
THE BLACK FREEDOM STRUGGLE IN THE GOLDEN STATE'S
CAPITOL, 1940-1988

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
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Doctor of Philosophy- History

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August 2015

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Dissertation Approval

The Graduate College
The University of Nevada, Las Vegas

May 5, 2015

This dissertation prepared by

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Creating the Black California Dream: Virna Canson and the Black Freedom Struggle in
the Golden State Capital, 1940-1988

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

Creating the Black California Dream: Virna Canson and the Black Freedom Struggle in the Golden State's Capitol, 1940-1988

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This dissertation examines the black struggle for racial equality in the Golden State's capitol from 1940-1988 and an integral leader of the movement, Virna Canson. Canson fought for nearly fifty years to dismantle discriminatory practices in housing, education, employment and worked to protect consumers. Her lifetime of activism reveals a different set of key issues people focused on at the grassroots level and shows how the fight for freedom in California differed from the South because the state's discriminatory practices were harder to pinpoint. Her work and the larger black community's activism in Sacramento also reveals how the black freedom struggle was not just located in a few geographical hotbeds in California, Los Angeles and the Bay Area, but existed in smaller cities as well. By focusing on the life of Canson, another layer of the black freedom struggle emerges in California showing how even people in smaller, secondary cities such as Sacramento were instrumental in the black freedom struggle. Canson's emergence as a leader in the black freedom struggle occurred because she was unwilling to part with her perception of the California Dream, where she could live, work and raise her children in an environment free from racism. When she discovered the existence of laws that mimicked the laws of the south she decided to dismantle these laws and create pathways for black community development. By including her activities within the

larger black freedom struggle, another facet of the fight emerges- the fight to create an independent economic basis for the black community and consumer protections. Canson believed consumer and economic rights were just as important as access to housing, employment, education and voting. In addition, by focusing on Canson I was able to expand the time frame of the black freedom struggle in Sacramento. California passed civil rights legislation before any other state in the nation. The state embraced a civil rights agenda but this acceptance was short lived and residents became concerned that their rights and “freedom of choice” were being usurped by practices of reverse discrimination. This dissertation connects the early years of activism in the state’s capitol with the 1970s and 1980s and reveals the challenges blacks continued to face in a state where conservative backlash emerged. I argue, Canson’s lifetime of activism in the black freedom struggle was vital to California and led to the establishment of a stronger black community not only in Sacramento, but also throughout the state.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dissertations represent a long journey, along this journey I have accrued numerous debts to a host of people who helped me in countless ways. I would like to thank the various members of my committee who shaped my work and allowed me to become a better, more thoughtful scholar. I wish to begin by thanking two individual that started out on my committee but moved on to other institutions during my studies. First, Dr. David Wrobel was instrumental in my decision to attend UNLV and his courses and sage advice helped provide the foundation for this project. In addition, Dr. Kevin Dawson pushed me think about my project on a larger historical scale, I will never forget the summer of intensive readings and discussions we had. I am indebted to my other committee members who were with me from the very beginning, Dr. Todd Robinson and Dr. Marcia Gallo helped with the project in various stages throughout the project and displayed great patience. I appreciate both of their continued support throughout my studies and a mere thank you is not sufficient enough. Many thanks to Dr. Mark Padoongpatt who stepped in at the last minute and helped see the completion of the dissertation. I am especially grateful to my chair, Dr. Andy Kirk, who provided encouragement and guidance throughout the process. He always had the right words for me as I was moving along in this process and I can never thank him enough for helping me navigate this academic roller coaster.

I would like to thank several generous UNLV faculty and staff who helped me in a variety of ways. First and foremost, I would like to thank Annette Amdal who made sure that I made it through the labyrinth paperwork and encouraged me to keep going

along the way. I am also grateful to Dr. David Tanenhaus for his words of encouragement and the opportunity to focus on my project. I came to UNLV at a time where there was an amazing cohort of people and I am forever grateful to these people, David Christiansen, Jordan Watkins, Leisl Carr Childers, and Margaret Huettl. I would like to thank one friend and classmate in particular, Nicholas Pellegrino, who was a tremendous support and an outlet when I needed one. There are other friends outside of UNLV that were instrumental in preserving my sanity along the way. Many thanks to my closest and dearest friend, Cheryl Wells, who listened to my many gripes but also made me laugh when I really needed a pick-me-up. In addition, I would like to thank Bill Gaba who became a part of my family during this process.

I cannot thank the numerous archivists who assisted me throughout this process. I completed the majority of my research at the Bancroft Library and the archivists always made me feel welcomed and they made researching a pleasurable experience. In particular, I must thank David Kessler who ensured I had all of the records and permissions I needed. David also encouraged me at moments and offered suggestions that proved instrumental to shaping my dissertation.

I owe my greatest thanks to my family. My parents, Fred and Paula, taught me to follow my dreams and realized that I would be a historian years before I did. My father made incredible sacrifices early in his life to make sure that my brother and I had what we needed and I can never thank him enough for that sacrifice. To my two girls, Temerity and Scout, thank you for your patience through this journey. Mommy is finally done. Last but not least, I am extremely grateful to my partner in life, William Bauer. He endured this journey with me and was always my biggest supporter and you were right, I

could do this! There are many others who I am sure I have failed to mention but I am truly grateful for the friendships and support that I was privy to in this journey and I am forever grateful.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In 2002, *Time Magazine* named Sacramento the most integrated city in the nation and celebrated the capitol's "Crayola Culture." In research done by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University for *TIME*, researchers concluded Sacramento had a Crayola Culture, which consisted of a population where everyone was considered a minority. They predicted by 2059 Sacramento would no longer have a white majority and suggested the capitol represented, "perhaps the clearest view into the nation's future – a glimpse into what our neighborhoods, schools, churches and police forces may look like just a few decades from now."¹ They attributed the city's diversity to affordable real estate, innovative housing for low-income families, and state agencies and college campuses that provided equal opportunity. The authors praised the diversity of the city and noted how people of different races seemed to live "side by side more successfully" than other cities. However, the article also noted the capitol was not a paradise because underneath the multicolored surface the inhabitants vacillated between racial harmony and tension.²

One factor the article overlooked was how the existence of the capitol's Crayola Culture was due to the city's historical development. Decades before the article, activists fought for the right to live peacefully side-by-side with people of other races and ethnicities. Given the smaller size of Sacramento, the fight for racial equality may seem inconsequential when compared to larger city centers such as San Francisco and Los

¹ Ron Stodghill and Amanda Bower, "Welcome to America's Most Diverse City," *Time Magazine*, August 25, 2002. Stodghill and Bower used findings determined by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University and data from the projected 2059 census to support their claim that Sacramento was America's most diverse city. It should also be noted that the 2000 Census was the first census to take into account individuals who were multiracial.

² Ibid.

Angeles. However, Sacramento holds a unique position within the larger struggle for racial equality, in particular the struggle for black freedom. Black residents, which I refer to as black Sacramentans, were a part of the cityscape from America's earliest entrance into the city and were important to the growth of the city and to racial politics that occurred throughout the state. The capitol was an important center in the black freedom struggle in Sacramento and several of the state's most important leaders in the fight for equality emerged out of the city. However, few historical narratives cover the black freedom struggle in Sacramento nor do they discuss one of the most significant leaders of the movement in California, Virna Canson.

Therefore, the major focus of "Creating the Black California Dream: Virna Canson and the Black Freedom Struggle in the Golden State's Capitol, 1940-1988" is examining the black freedom struggle in Sacramento by using the life and activism of Canson to show the primary issues black Sacramentans faced. By focusing on the life of Canson, another layer of the black freedom struggle emerges in California showing how even people in smaller, secondary cities such as Sacramento were leaders in the black freedom struggle. In 1940, Canson moved to Sacramento with her husband and she entered the state with her own idea of the California Dream, where she could live, and her husband could work, and her children could grow up in an environment free from racism. However, similar to other blacks that moved into Sacramento during World War II, the city fell short of its racially progressive veneer and she was startled by the prevalence of systemized racism. When her vision of the California Dream did not match with the racial reality of the Golden State she decided the only way to fix the issues she confronted was by immersing herself in the fight for racial equality. When she moved to the city, there were no laws allowing for segregation

or disfranchisement but de facto segregation in housing, employment, politics and public life were deeply embedded into the city.³ For nearly fifty years, Canson remained committed to fighting against oppression and discrimination. Her lifetime of activism reveals a different set of key issues people focused on at the grassroots level and shows how the fight for freedom in California differed from the South because the state's discriminatory practices were harder to pinpoint in housing, employment, education and consumer protections. Black presses and the NAACP remember Canson as the "Mother of the Civil Rights Movement in the West" but few scholars mention her lifetime of activism. Chicago Journalist and one of the nation's foremost commentators on black history, Vernon Jarrett, lamented that few people knew Canson and called her a pioneer who "...made black America great."⁴ Throughout her life she was committed to the black freedom struggle and played a pivotal role in fighting for equal access in housing, employment, education and consumer protections. However, Canson's name and her leadership barely grace the pages of historical narratives about the black freedom struggle in California.⁵

³ Quintard Taylor posited Blacks moved into the West in search of a community free from Jim Crow practices and used a variety of methods to combat racial discriminatory practices from taking root in the West. Douglas Flamming maintained that when African Americans came to Los Angeles they were, "*bound and determined* to keep Jim Crow out of their new home and make L.A. and the West a shining example of what America might become."³ Flamming observed that Black leaders who emerged in the West, referred to as racemen and racewomen, not only fought against racial injustices, suffered from tremendous pressures: "To be black and middle class and a race leader meant carrying the everyday burden of being inferior while always acting as a superior citizen."

⁴ Wyatt Buchanan, "Virna Canson—NAACP Leader for Western U.S.," *SF Gate*, April 18, 2003.

⁵ In several works her name appears in a line or two and in one publication her name is even misspelled as Verna instead of Virna. Many of the scholars who wrote about the black freedom struggle utilized the Western Regional Collection of the NAACP located at the Bancroft Library. This collection was started by Virna Canson and includes an extensive oral interview of her, but scholars still tend to focus on the work of the men involved in the NAACP. In works where her name appears momentarily on the page, scholars have failed to recognize the central role that she played in the state. Historian Mark Brilliant's work mentions Virna on one page of *The Color of America has Changed* and notes how she was engaged in the fight to defend the Rumford Fair Housing Act but then she fades away.

In addition, Sacramento remains an important city to study within the larger framework of the black freedom struggle. Blacks who moved into Sacramento entered a smaller, secondary city but they were not immune to the racial climate of the urban environment. They discovered the existence of a racial caste system and rules about racial etiquette that locals expected them to follow. By examining a smaller, secondary city we expand the body of scholarship on the black freedom struggle in California by extending the geographical boundaries of inquiry outside of the major metropolitan areas. Historians have focused on Los Angeles and the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Area because the black population was higher in these regions and the war industry jobs created population booms in these areas. In addition, many of the more radical elements, such as the Black Panther Party, emerged in these areas and provide a touchstone for historians to base their narratives upon. The story of the black freedom struggle in large urban settings is an essential component; however, when we look outside of these centers a more complete historical narrative emerges that includes the voices of critical actors throughout the entire state. Moreover, the state's struggle did not exist within a few key geographical hotbeds, but also occurred smaller cities and towns throughout the state. Thousands of blacks migrated to smaller cities such as San Diego, Fresno, Bakersfield, Stockton, and to the state's capitol and faced racial practices designed to relegate them to the lowest rungs of society. These individuals worked tirelessly to dismantle these practices and united together in the larger statewide and national struggle.

This study also expands the time frame of the black freedom struggle by looking at the larger multigenerational migration that blacks participated in after the end of Reconstruction. While several works acknowledge the Great Migration and the Second

Migration, fewer works place the longer migration pattern of blacks to California within the context of the black freedom struggle.⁶ Thousands of blacks, called Exodusters, left the South during the 1880s and 1890s and went to Oklahoma to be a part of a colonization movement where they could establish their own self-segregated, autonomous towns. Their movement out of the South represented a desire to claim the rights of full citizenship and to escape the Jim Crow South. Canson grew up in several all-black towns in Oklahoma, which gave her the political basis she needed to become a leader in the black freedom struggle in California. Similar to Okies, black Oklahomans sought to take advantage of the economic opportunities in California and left the economically depressed conditions of the state. This study seeks to connect the earlier migration of blacks to the Midwest to the migration of individuals to Sacramento during World War II to show how blacks were adamant they have racial equality. Their commitment came from years of being in areas with larger black populations that had a political presence and their belief in the California Dream, where they could live and work in an environment free from racism.

As historian Kirse Granat May summarized in his work, “the dream was simple: that because of a place called California, life might be better.”⁷ The California Dream was a myth based upon a concentrated form of the American Dream and promised wealth, health, fame, and the final frontier where people could have a second chance at land and prosperity. Even before Americans entrance into the state, Europeans accounts created images of an

⁶ There are several important works that cover both the first Great Migration and the Second Migration. Some exceptional works are: Carole Marks, *Farewell: We're Good and Gone: The Great Black Migration* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), James Grossman, *Land of Hope: Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1991), and James M. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America*.

⁷ Kirse Granat May, *Golden State, Golden Youth, 1955-1966* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 3.

agricultural utopia. For decades, the appeal of the California Dream drew people to the state and the dream was further fueled by the discovery of gold. The Gold Rush brought thousands of people to Sacramento that believed the land was full of prosperity and would provide them with an opportunity to begin anew again.⁸ Many Americans were drawn by the promise of the California Dream, including blacks that created their own vision of the California Dream where they could live in an environment free from racism.⁹

Due to an agricultural boom and the expansion of the railways, California's overall population continued to grow from the 1880s to the 1940s. However, America's entrance into World War II created a population boom for California and Sacramento was a part of that growth. Due to the state's geographical proximity to the Pacific theater, the federal

⁸ The California Dream was used as a promotional tactic to lure migrants to the state and grew in the minds of Americans who imagined that life would be different in the Golden State. Carey McWilliams called the stated the "great exception" in his work *California: The Great Exception* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1971). Kevin Starr has written numerous volumes on California and how the California Dream emerged and changed over time. He is known as the premier historian on California and a few of his more notable works on the California Dream that fit within the time frame of this dissertation are: *Americans and the California Dream, 1850-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), *Inventing the Dream: California through the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) and *Golden Dreams: California in an Age of Abundance, 1950-63* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). There are numerous works covering the history of the California Dream and how it emerged and endured over the years. Several of the most notable works in this field are Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as a Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1970); Ethan Rarick, *California Rising: The Life and Times of Pat Brown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Kevin's Paul J.P. Sandul, *California Dreaming: Boosterism, Memory and Rural Suburbs in the Golden State* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2014).

⁹ The idea of the California Dream was not just a dream for whites but for blacks wealthy enough to make the journey to California. They came with their own conception of the California Dream and several works that discuss the creation of the dream and how blacks envisioned a racial utopia in the state. A few of the best works in the field are: Lawrence B. de Graaf, Kevin Mulroy and Quitard Taylor, eds. *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California* (Los Angeles: Autry Museum of Western Heritage, 2001), Shirley Ann Moore, *To Place Our Deeds: The African American Community in Richmond, California, 1910-1963* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Albert Broussard, *Black San Francisco: The Struggle for Racial Equality in the West, 1900-1954*, Douglas Flamming, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America*, Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

government poured billions of dollars into the state and built military installations and wartime production plants. Sacramento was chosen as a site to benefit from these dollars and they had three major military installations: McClellan Field, Mather Field, and the signal depot.¹⁰ In addition to the creation of military jobs, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802, which prohibited racial discrimination in the national defense industry. For blacks, the executive order served as a clarion call inviting them into a mythical promised land, where they were free from the Jim Crow practices and laws that plagued the South.¹¹ During the war, 338,000 blacks moved into California in search of employment opportunities, inexpensive housing, and the possibility of living in a state without discriminatory practices.¹²

Despite the passage of Executive Order 9906, which authorized the removal of Germans, Italians and Japanese American Citizens, the opening of employment created by the passage of Executive Order 8802 fostered a vision of racial progressivism in the state. Blacks fashioned their own ideal of the California Dream, where they could live and work in an environment free from racism. While their conception of the California Dream may seem unrealistic given the overall history of the state, blacks believed in the California

¹⁰ Steven M. Avella, *Sacramento and the Catholic Church: Shaping a Capital City* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2008), 177-178.

¹¹ At the same moment that the United States opened the doors for minorities in military production plants in California they also stripped individuals of their civil liberties. California was the target of Executive Order 9906, which authorized the removal of citizens to assembly centers and suspended the civil liberties of German, Italian, and Japanese American citizens. .

¹² There are several works that detail the migration into California some of the most notable are: Quintard Taylor, *In Search of a Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998); Lawrence B. De Graaf, Kevin Mulroy, Quintard Taylor, ed., *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000).

Dream.¹³ Their beliefs were supported by earlier accounts given by earlier black residents and visitors of the state who gave glowing reports of the state. For example, W.E.B. Du Bois visited Los Angeles in 1913 and he wrote about his visit in *The Crisis*. He encouraged others to move to Los Angeles and remarked, “ Los Angeles is wonderful. Nowhere in the United States is the Negro so well and beautifully housed.”¹⁴ Jefferson L. Edmunds, a black resident of Los Angeles and owner of the black newspaper the *Liberator*, regularly wrote about the positive racial conditions in Los Angeles and remarked, “ white people received them kindly, employed them at good wages, treated them as men and women.”¹⁵ These accounts led to unrealistic expectations about the racial environment in the Golden State and grew to mythical proportions within the minds of black migrants who were eager to flee racially oppressive environments. Unfortunately, blacks quickly discovered the racial liberalism celebrated by black presses and the state masked the harsh reality of an environment rife with discriminatory practices, which existed in every sector of society including: employment, education, politics, and housing. However, they refused to accept the racial conditions they encountered and fought to establish their own California Dream in their new homeland.¹⁶

¹³ The California Dream took different shapes and forms for many individuals who moved into the state. Some envisioned a utopia and their beliefs were supported by the existence of early utopian colonies in the state. The envisioned a place where as Robert V. Hine wrote where they could, “ establish a new social pattern based upon a vision of the ideal society,” *California’s Utopian Communities* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1973), 5.

¹⁴ W.E.B. DuBois letter quoted in Lonnie G. Bunch III, “ ‘The Greatest State for the Negro’: Jefferson L. Edmunds, Black Propagandist of the California Dream,” in *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000) edited by Lawrence B. De Graaf, Kevin Mulroy, and Quintard Taylor, 129.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 135.

¹⁶ As noted before the ideal of the California Dream was envisioned by millions of Americans who formulated their own ideal. While historical evidence contours the reality of what some scholars have called a racial utopia, hundreds of thousands of African Americans still clung to this ideal. Scholars who address this idea of a racial utopia in California are: Quintard Taylor, *In Search of a*

In addition, my study covers a longer time period from the 1940s through the 1980s. This expansion of time allowed me to demonstrate how Canson changed her strategies and focused a great deal of her attention on consumer rights. Canson witnessed how the state embraced a civil right's agenda under Governor Brown and passed a series of civil rights legislation covering education, housing, and employment before the federal government. Court decisions and national civil rights legislation opened the doors of educational institutions, but the implementation of these decisions and laws at the grassroots level suggested that society resisted civil rights.¹⁷ The local reaction and interpretation of these laws quickly exposed the limits of racial progressivism. Few scholars connect the activism of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s with the later activities of the 1970s and 1980s. Moreover, by the 1970s the black middle class and the NAACP are portrayed as institutions using antiquated forms of activism that no longer resonated with the youth. However, in California the methods used by the local and regional chapters NAACP challenge this viewpoint and demonstrate the organizations' continued focus on youth centered issues. By examining the decades after the so-called "end" of the black freedom struggle in California,

Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998); Albert Broussard, *Black San Francisco: The Struggle for Racial Equality in the West, 1900-1954* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993); Douglas Flamming, in *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Mark Brilliant, *The Color of America has Changed: How Racial Diversity Shaped Civil Rights Reform in 1941-1978* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹⁷ White opposition to the gains of civil rights has been discussed by several important scholars such as: Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003). Another important scholar contributing to the field is Derrick Bell who introduced a theoretical framework that will be utilized in this dissertation known as Critical Race Theory. Bell argues in several of his works including *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 1992) that racism was a permanent feature of American society and that society was only willing to advance race relations to a certain degree when they saw that it benefitted their own interests as well, or what he called "interest convergence theory."

a disparate portrait emerges that reveals civil rights activities persisted because the passage of the Civil Rights Acts did not signal the end of societal or institutional prejudice in California or anywhere else in the nation.

Building upon previous scholarship on black freedom struggles, my dissertation “Creating the Black California Dream: Virna Canson and the Black Freedom Struggle in the Golden State’s Capitol, 1940-1988,” uses the activism of Canson to tell a larger story about the black freedom struggle in the capitol. My research utilizes an interdisciplinary approach and bridged together several academic disciplines including studies in civil rights, Women’s Studies, African American Studies and western history. This approach allowed me to create another layer of understanding to black freedom struggles that occurred in Sacramento and shows why these activities were important in understanding the black freedom struggle in the state. My work recognizes the earlier works, which laid the foundation of the field and allowed the field to progress to a point where scholars can look at the black freedom struggle as a part of a national movement. The historiography has progressed beyond one that only examined the activities of the southern movement and has blossomed into a field that encompasses freedom struggles that occurred throughout all fifty states.

Within the academy the first scholars of civil rights emphasized key male leaders, major federal legislative victories and focused on civil rights activities in the southern states.¹⁸ These narratives concentrated on the “traditional” narrative of the modern Civil

¹⁸ Examples of works that look at the Civil Rights Movement as a movement focused on desegregation in the South are: August Meir and Elliot Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942-1968* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality: 1954-1992* (Canada: Harper Collins, 1981, reprint 1991); David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Harper Collins, 1986); William Henry Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro,*

Rights Movement, which placed civil rights activities strictly inside the geographical walls of the South and within the chronological boundaries of 1954 to 1968.¹⁹ These triumphalist tomes were supported by the media's portrayal of the Civil Rights Movement and Gunnar Myrdal's report entitled, *The American Dilemma*, which placed the "Negro problem" geographically within the South.²⁰ These early narratives provided an essential basis for the field because they shaped a national perspective for the emergence, growth, and culmination of the movement. However, many of these initial studies failed to look beyond the media created narrative of progressivism and read like a highlight reel of key moments. In addition to narratives written by academics, there were also works written by participants themselves who revealed what the actual conditions were like in the South and the hardships they endured due to their involvement in the Civil Rights Movement.²¹

The next generation of academics dug deeper into the civil rights activities in the South and utilized techniques from social history and re-examined history from the "bottom up." These works revealed how local and national struggles differed from one another and

North Carolina, and the Struggle for Freedom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Robert H. Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985); Aldon Morris, *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

¹⁹ These works considered the *Brown v. Board* decision, which overturned the separate but equal doctrine of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, as the beginning of the modern Civil Rights Movement and placed the end of the movement with the passage of federal civil rights legislation.

²⁰ Several scholars make the connection between the media's portrayal of the Civil Rights Movement and Gunnar Myrdal's report in shaping the initial historical coverage of the movement. One of the best in summarizing this connection is Douglas Flamming in *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

²¹ Anne Moody's work *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York: Dell, 1968) gave readers a first hand account of growing up in Mississippi and the hardships she endured. She also described her experiences within the Civil Rights Movement and her involvement in the sit-in movement at Woolworths, voter registrations drives, and the March on Washington.

suggested the local struggles served as the catalysts for activism at national level.²² With the creation of grassroots studies, historians revealed the significance of community studies to informing the larger national narrative. In addition, the development of African American Studies within the academy introduced important theories of social change that called for moving blacks from the periphery of academic inquiry to the center.²³ Community studies placed black squarely in the center of their analyses and created a template for the examination of civil rights activities outside the geographical boundaries of the South.²⁴

Additionally, researchers were stimulated by the growth of women's and social history and shifted their focus away from the main, iconic leaders of the movement and discovered the presence of female activists at the local levels who formed the backbone of civil rights communities.²⁵ Initial examinations of women's participation in the Civil Rights Movement suggested females represented the majority of the participants of the

²² Aldon Morris' work *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1984) set the stage for scholars to begin examining the activities of grassroots organizations. A decade later, John Dittmer followed in Morris' footsteps with his work *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994). In addition to scholarly publications another important contribution to the field was the documentary *Eyes on the Prize* that first aired in 1987 and 1990. This documentary highlighted the Montgomery bus boycott, Little Rock, the Freedom Riders, the March on Washington and Mississippi's grass-roots civil rights groups.

²³ A leading professor in the field of African American studies, Molefi Kete Asante, argued for the emergence of an African renaissance that focused on African agency and Afrocentricity. Asante argued in his work *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (Chicago: Africa World Press, 1988, 2003) that African Americans be placed in the center of the analysis so the history of African Americans would, "never again be shoved to the side in our history and not be relegated as back-up players to Europeans in the grand drama of humanity."

²⁴ Matthew Lassiter and Joseph Crespino, Ed. *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) this work challenged the ways in which scholars view southern history and that the myth of southern distinctiveness has led to other erroneous stereotypes that need to be dismantled.

²⁵ Vicki Crawford, "Beyond the Human Self: Grassroots Activists in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement," in Vicki Crawford, Jacqueline Ann Rouse and Barbara Woods, eds., *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965* (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1990), 20-25.

movement but were seldom the leaders.²⁶ Women held secondary roles in the movement because as historian Harvard Sitkoff maintained, “it helped black men regain self – confidence and a sense of manhood usurped by a racist society that was determined to emasculate them.”²¹ Moreover, scholars argued for the application of a gendered analysis because women's leadership positions could only be understood within the context of gender constructions of the period.²² These studies proposed women’s involvement in civil rights activities rested on the middle class ideology of “uplifting the race” promoted by W.E.B. Du Bois.²³ Under this tutelage, black women were educated both formally and informally to manage the triple burden of domesticity, professionalism and community development.²⁴ When historians incorporated the ideals of middle-class respectability and examined the activities organizations outside those traditionally recognized civil rights organizations they discovered women in leadership roles in civil rights.²⁵ Moreover, when works accounted for the gender constructions of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, scholars discovered an array of female experiences ranging from participant to organizational leader. A crucial factor in these studies involved the incorporation of theoretical frameworks introduced by feminist scholars who addressed theories of subjectivity, questions of difference, the construction of social relations power, and the conceptual implications of binary oppositions.²⁶ Historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham challenged scholars to move beyond the fallacy of a homogenous “womanhood” and account for real differences of class, status, color and regional culture and how these change over time in order to provide an accurate portrayal of the

²⁶ Sociologist, Belinda Robnett, found that African American women seldom worked in central leadership roles but they were “bridge leaders,” who functioned as important intermediaries between the community and the larger national civil rights organizations in her work *How Long? How Long: African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

multiplicity of female experiences.²⁷ These perspectives opened the door for participants to tell their own story and acknowledged differences in those experiences based on class, status, color and regional culture.²⁸

Within the past twenty years, historians have expanded the scope of the black freedom struggle outside the geographical walls of the South and beyond the narrow chronological framework of the traditional narrative. These works also effectively shattered the myth of “southern exceptionalism,” which historian Matthew Lassiter defined as the tendency to encapsulate the South into a separate region representing, “all evil tendencies overcome, mistakes atoned for, progress yet to be made.”²⁹ These scholars looked at northern and western states and discovered racially discriminatory practices that mimicked Jim Crow.³⁰ In response to these practices, grassroots and statewide organizations emerged in all fifty states. Historians studying civil rights activities in the North and West discovered

²⁷ Evelyln Brooks Higginbotham, “African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, (Winter 1992), 17:2, 251-274.

²⁸ Social and cultural history also caused historians to look beyond intercultural exchanges within the context of viewing their relationships to whites and started to see that these women had their own survival strategies and communities. Feminist scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins opened the door for these types of analyses because she challenged white feminist scholars to include the experiences of women of color and to broaden their scope by brining race more prominently into their analyses of power. In addition other scholars such as Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham challenged feminist theorist to move beyond the fallacy of a homogenous “womanhood” and account for real differences of class, status, color and regional culture and how these change over time in order to provide an accurate portrayal of the multiplicity of female experiences.

²⁹ Matthew D. Lassiter and Joseph Crespino, ed. *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 99. Other scholars who have elaborated on the myth of southern exceptionalism are: Thomas Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, ed. *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008).

³⁰ It should be noted that the first Jim Crow laws were passed in the North. However the historical record often overlooks this fact and places the start of Jim Crow laws within the South, which further perpetuates the idea of southern exceptionalism.

blacks migrated out of the South because they wanted to escape the Jim Crow South and believed better racial conditions existed in their new home states.

However, migrants discovered the racial progressivism they envisioned did not exist and the Jim Crow practices of the South were already embedded in the social and political landscape. Historian Quintard Taylor noted this disconnect in his work on Seattle where blacks found that the, “ideal of racial toleration and egalitarianism proudly espoused by the vast majority of the city’s residents (was) precariously juxtaposed to a background of racial fear, prejudice, and discrimination.”³¹ Grass roots organizations emerged in these areas because black newcomers were unwilling to accept racial intolerance.³² Moreover, blacks were optimistic because of the political emergence of American liberalism, which made blacks believe the state was responsible for using its power to protect individual rights.³³ Scholars focusing on the western struggle for black freedom argued despite the limits of racial progressivism strong black communities emerged in urban areas.³⁴

³¹ Quintard Taylor, *The Forging of a Black Community: Seattle’s Central District from 1870 through the Civil Rights Era* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), 3-4.

³² Other works that noted the disconnect between a racially progressive city and the actual racial environment are Albert Broussard, *Black San Francisco*, Douglas Flamming, *Bound for Freedom*, Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits*, and Robert Self’s *American Babylon*.

³³ There were a number of critical developments that gave African Americans more political leverage. A critical change occurred during the New Deal where New Deal liberalism was linked with racial liberalism and the Black community successfully used this connection to effectively lobby for antidiscrimination legislation. Several works looking at this linkage that broaden the scope of the origins of civil rights activities are: Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005). In addition there was an emergence of a strong civil rights unionism movement that allowed workers to confront a system of racial capitalism that relegated African Americans to the lowest paying jobs. Several important works detailing the importance of unionism are: Robert Rodgers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

³⁴ Quintard Taylor posited Blacks moved into the West in search of a community free from Jim Crow practices and used a variety of methods to combat racial discriminatory practices from taking root in the West. Douglas Flamming maintained that when African Americans came to Los Angeles they were, “bound and determined to keep Jim Crow out of their new home and make L.A. and the

According to historian Robert Self, the history of postwar African American social movements and politics in the North and West, “requires a richer, deeper, and necessarily more complicated story,” because civil rights organizations had unique forms and trajectories and experienced its own successes and setbacks.³⁵

Building upon the previous scholarship, my dissertation’s research is grounded in extensive archival research. The NAACP records, “National Association for the Advancement, Region I, Records, 1942-1986” that are housed at the University of California, Berkeley’s Bancroft Library were especially important. In addition, I used oral histories conducted by California’s Regional Oral History Office and by the Sacramento Ethnic Communities Survey (1983-1985). The oral histories completed by the Regional Oral History Office contain interviews of some of the most important political leaders who had first hand experiences with the development of the black community in Sacramento. Also, there are several important interviews of prominent black Sacramentans that were conducted by Clarence Caesar, who was a graduate student at Sacramento State writing a thesis on the development of the black Sacramentan community at the time of the interviews.³⁶ Given his historical insight, the questions he posed in the interviews provide invaluable insight to Old Sacramento, when the population of black Sacramentans was relatively small, and the transition that occurred during World War II when the Black population suddenly increased in the city. Another archive I used for this study was the

West a shining example of what America might become.”³⁴ Flamming observed that Black leaders who emerged in the West, referred to as racemen and racewomen, not only fought against racial injustices, suffered from tremendous pressures: “To be black and middle class and a race leader meant carrying the everyday burden of being inferior while always acting as a superior citizen.”

³⁵ Robert Self, *American Babylon*, 11.

³⁶ Caesar is considered an expert on the development of Black Sacramentan community and wrote his thesis “A Historical Overview of the Development of Sacramento,” was completed in 1985, he served for years as a historian for California State Office of Historic Preservation.

African American Museum and Library of Oakland, which had a few pertinent collections including Virna Canson's personal letters and writings. I also used governmental records, located in the California State Library and California State Archive, which covered issues on housing, employment, and education.³⁷ In addition to these records, I relied on newspapers from California and throughout the country because they highlighted the activities of Canson and the black freedom struggle in Sacramento.

In the second chapter, "Creating Our Own Land," I concentrate on the longer multi-generational movement of blacks who were continually searching for environments free from prejudice and discrimination. Blacks who came to the Golden State in the 1940s came into the state for a number of reasons, but their primary motivation for moving was the promise of an environment free from racism. Their movement was part of a longer familial legacy where blacks migrated because they wanted access to the rights of full citizenship. The first chapter links the migration of blacks into Oklahoma in the 1890s with the later migration of blacks into California during World War II. Blacks who went to California had grandparents and parents who had moved out of the South just a generation or two before to escape Jim Crow policies. Their ancestors found power in leaving the South and entered states such as Oklahoma, Texas, and Arkansas and established their own towns that could not be controlled by oppressive racial policies.

Black Sooners eagerly rushed across the territory's border by wagon, horse and train and came with their own vision of expansion into Oklahoma's fertile valleys. They were on a larger quest in search of their own piece of the American Dream, where they could own

³⁷ These records also contain some important governmental reports that were done by the State Attorney General, Evelle Younger. Some of the reports housed in both locations have earlier drafts of the reports that show information that was deleted from the reports and some of these have detailed notes as to why these deletions occurred.

land and have economic, political, and social freedom. These all-black towns in Oklahoma flourished and provided young people with unique racial environments. Blacks who grew up with racial tolerance and with a long legacy of familial activism were not content to accept discriminatory practices. Canson had the privilege of growing up in several all-black towns in Oklahoma and this gave her the background that she would need to become a leader in California.

When the Golden State appeared on the horizon as the next racial utopia blacks in the Sooner State took notice and 23,000 blacks left the state.³⁸ Their backgrounds provided them with a unique set of tools that enabled them to be involved in a lifetime of activism. Moreover, people like Canson realized early on that that racism and prejudice was not because something was wrong with them but stemmed from a belief system that created an ignorant white population. When she later recounted her childhood Canson remarked, “It never came through that something was wrong with us, what came through was that people who mistreat other people ...there’s something wrong with them. They are the person that you have to try to work to help and educate.”³⁹ Girded with these life principles, Canson entered the Golden State armed with a lifetime of activism.

The third chapter, “Searching for Freedom in the Promised Land, ” examines the black community prior to World War II and connects this to the black population boom caused by the war. The increase of black migrants into the city significantly changed the dynamics of the city, but in order to understand this shift it is important to consider the racial landscape of Sacramento before the War. The racial environment was not what new migrants expected and they were alarmed by the lack of activism in the black community.

³⁸ Taylor, *In Search of a Racial Frontier*, 251.

³⁹ Canson, “Waging a War on Poverty,”8.

However, they were unaware of the gains made by the black community and they underestimated the power of existing leadership.

This chapter also expands upon urban theories that suggest black populations were tolerated by whites in northern and western cities when the black population remained relatively small.⁴⁰ Whites became less tolerant when larger numbers of blacks moved into their communities and racial tensions increased. These studies center on larger urban areas and do not incorporate smaller secondary cities like Sacramento. Similar to other black communities, black Sacramentans felt like their racial conditions were good until the population increased during WWII. They established their own community institutions and had employment opportunities and access to education. However, Sacramento had strict racial codes that restricted black advancement and relegated blacks to the lowest rungs of society. Blacks were forced to abide by racial codes in order to maintain racial harmony. When blacks came into Sacramento in the 1940s, they came with a different set of expectations.⁴¹ They believed in the “Double V” campaign promoted by the black presses and truly believed they were fighting for freedom for others overseas and racial equality at home.⁴² These leaders clung to California’s progressive narrative of racial liberalism and

⁴⁰ Several scholars discuss theories of black population change and the increase in racial tension in the community. One of the best works discussing this changes is Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996);

⁴¹ There were a number of critical developments that gave blacks more political leverage. A critical change occurred during the New Deal where New Deal liberalism was linked with racial liberalism and the Black community successfully used this connection to effectively lobby for antidiscrimination legislation. Two important works looking at this linkage that broaden the scope of the origins of civil rights activities are: Thomas Sugrue’s *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* and Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

⁴² Several exemplars of works covering the “Double V” campaign are: Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, *Double V: The Civil Rights Struggle for the Tuskegee Airman* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1992) and Jonathan Rosenberg, *How Far the Promised*

pushed to create their own California Dream. Due to the influx of blacks and other minorities during the war, civil rights organizations flourished and created an environment ripe for the passage of civil rights legislation. The civil rights leaders in Sacramento had an incredible amount of influence than other second tier cities because they lived in the state's capitol and had direct access to the political workings of the state.

The fourth chapter, "In Search of the Picket Fence," investigates the methods used by Canson and others to dismantle discriminatory practices in both public housing and in the sale of private residential homes. This chapter examines the historical trajectory of practices that allowed for racial discrimination in the housing market in order to show how embedded racial exclusionary practices were in Sacramento's housing sector. Racially restrictive practices in housing led a two-track housing system in Sacramento, which produced easier pathways for home ownership for whites while simultaneously limiting the availability of housing for blacks. Other works have focused on the passage of the Hawkins Fair Housing Act, which led to fair housing practices in California, but decades before the passage of Hawkins others worked tirelessly to chip away at restrictive housing policies. This chapter highlights the fight to end practices that segregated residents in public housing and also examines the *Ming* case to show that activism was increasing in Sacramento. These two incidents also reveals how other individuals in Sacramento, who were not a part of the black community, were willing to become involved in the fight for equality. Canson built upon the momentum for open access in housing to push for employment opportunities in Campbell's Soup Company.

Land?: World Affairs and the American Civil Rights Movement from the First World War to Vietnam (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

The fifth chapter, "Creating Economic Freedom," concentrates on the establishment of NAACP credit unions under the leadership of Canson. After World War II, millions of veterans benefitted from the GI Bill, which provided numerous benefits to veterans including low cost, low interest loans. However, many black veterans were unable to take advantage of the GI Bill because the distribution of these resources was left to all white institutions. In addition, banks followed discriminatory lending practices implemented by the Home Owner's Loan Corporation (HOLC) and the Federal Housing Authority (FHA) that equated undesirable neighborhoods with race, a practice known as redlining. This policy effectively restricted minority access to low interest mortgages available through the GI Bill, which helped to propel whites into the middle classes. These banking practices led to a two tiered housing system allowing white access to housing while simultaneously preventing economic advancement of blacks and other minorities. Due to these policies, when blacks moved into Sacramento during the 1940s and 1950s they were kept out of more desirable neighborhoods, regardless of their income levels. In order to combat these policies, Canson understood the importance of the black community to produce their own economic institutions and focused on the growth of NAACP credit unions in Sacramento and throughout the state. These credit unions were not only banking institutions, but also were centers for providing economic education for consumers. Canson saw a direct correlation between racial equality and consumer's rights and pushed the national branch of the NAACP to adopt a credit union agenda, which focused on expanding credit unions throughout the United States. The credit unions served as vital community centers and allowed for the expansion of economic opportunities.

The sixth chapter, “Voices for the Consumer: Fighting for Economic Protection” looks at how Canson expanded her focus on economics and consumer protection outside of the NAACP credit union through her work in the Consumer Advisory Committee, rebuilding Watts, and lobbying against legislation that limited freedoms of all minorities. Throughout her earlier work with credit unions, Canson recognized greater issues hampered the economic progress of every Californian. Credit unions addressed some of these issues; however, there were few legal protections for the consumer. Canson knew corporations and retailers were guilty of participating in unethical business practices that deceived, manipulated, and even endangered the health and well being of the consumer. In 1964, Canson was appointed by Governor Brown to the Consumer’s Advisory Counsel (CAC) to serve as a credit union specialist. Canson worked in the CAC, under the leadership of Helen Ewing Nelson, to get laws passed that protected consumers and lobbied against the passage of bills harmful to consumers.

This chapter also examines the role the CAC played in the redevelopment of Watts after the rebellion. Canson and Nelson were the first two individuals from any state agency to go into Watts after the melee. Canson was one of the first leaders to realize that the Watts Rebellion was more than a racial revolt and she believed it was the first real consumer revolt. Canson recognized that the key to rebuilding Watts was to apply the principles of black economic freedom.⁴³ She implemented a plan that focused on addressing consumer advocacy and established the first service market, which functioned as a one stop shopping location for individuals in need of help. Canson and Nelson started consumer education

⁴³ This dissertation will utilize the term rebellion because what occurred in Watts happened was the result of the continuation of racial injustices and persistence of poverty an inequality in Watts pushed individuals to rebel against these practices.

classes and buying clubs in Watts to help alleviate high prices. Canson also realized that the people needed to have access to lines of credit and helped local leaders found credit unions throughout low-income neighborhoods.

This chapter also observes the political shift that occurred in California with the election of Governor Ronald Reagan. Canson believed that Governor Reagan's election signaled an end to racially progressive policies. She wanted to remain on the CAC as long as she could but Reagan had other plans for the CAC. Nelson was fired and the CAC was stripped of power both economically and politically. Canson resigned from the CAC and moved on to work as a lobbyist for the NAACP. She understood that the black community had to work even harder to combat a government that seemed set of stripping away laws that created equality.

The seventh chapter, "Preserving Our Children: Keeping Opportunities Open for the Next Generation," analyzes the impact the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision had on California. Similar to other states outside of the South, California did not address *Brown* until the 1960s because the state did not have legalized segregation. However, California did have segregated schools because of the prevalence of racial exclusion in neighborhoods, which created racially homogenous neighborhoods and led to racially homogenous schools. This chapter looks specifically at how state and local entities interpreted the legislation and changed the scope and meaning to fit their own ideal of racial equality. Canson and other civil rights leaders knew there were efforts in California to avoid *Brown* and segregation continued in all of California's urban schools. California leaders saw that *Brown*, the Civil Rights Acts, and Affirmative Action policies failed to transform the real enemy to equal opportunity: white societies failure to accept full integration.

This chapter also uncovers another aspect of Canson's fight against segregation in schools. Canson implemented her own remedy to exclusionary practices by promoting and fostering the development of Afro-Academic, Cultural, Technological and Scientific Olympics (ACT-SO). Chicago journalist, Vernon Jarrett created the program to highlight and promote the intelligence of black youth. Canson saw the potential for the program and petitioned the national branch of the NAACP use California as the test site for the program. The national branch agreed to her request and she aggressively pushed for the establishment of ACT-SO programs throughout the state. Under the guidance of Canson, ACT-SO flourished and became extremely popular on the West Coast.

The eighth chapter, "Challenging Affirmative Action: The Continuation of White Racism" offers an alternative perspective on "reverse discrimination" in higher education in California. This chapter connects the *Bakke* case to an acceptance of claims of "reverse discrimination" within larger society. The consequences of the *Bakke* case went beyond higher education and fueled the proliferation of white "backlash" in California and the rest of the nation. The *Bakke* case and unclear ruling allowed for the continuation of discriminatory practices against blacks because some whites believed their private rights were being sacrificed for others. This chapter examines the expansion of educational opportunities in higher education in the 1950s, the unraveling of these opportunities with *Bakke*, and connects *Bakke* to the race riot at Taft College to demonstrate the state's limits to of protecting educational advancement for blacks. Moreover, it also shows the continuation of the black freedom struggle in the Golden State after the triumphs of the Civil Rights Acts. Canson and other black leaders realized white "backlash" and false

assertions of “reverse discrimination” were as lethal to the quest for equality as previous practices of discrimination.

My work concludes with Canson’s efforts to establish avenues to preserve the voices of black activists in California and to continue to promote the advancement of blacks. She believed the state overlooked the history of blacks and that the state was still failing at fulfilling the educational needs of blacks. In order to fix their oversight, Canson worked with the University of California, Berkeley to start a collection based on the records of the Western Regional division of the NAACP. In addition to creating the archive she also spearheaded the establishment of an educational unit that went into communities and brought educational resources on blacks. She also used her last years in office to forge a partnership between the NAACP and Pacific Bell that paved the way for thousands of minorities to enter into the technological fields. Canson handed over the reigns of leadership to the Western Division of the NAACP in 1988 but she succeeded in leaving a legacy for others to follow.

By focusing on the life of Canson, a more complete picture of the black freedom struggle emerges showing how people even in smaller, secondary cities such as Sacramento were engaged in the black freedom struggle. As historian Todd E. Robinson noted in his work on the black freedom struggle in Grand Rapids, “ the long fight for freedom in secondary cities... has remained situated on the periphery of conventional civil rights narratives.”⁴⁴ Even more importantly, her lifetime of activism reveals a strong female leader of civil rights in the West. While several works have acknowledged the leadership Fannie Lou Hamer, Eleanor Ragsdale, Rosa Parks, and Charlotta Bass there are still few works that

⁴⁴ Todd E. Robinson, *A City Within a City: The Black Freedom Struggle in Grand Rapids, Michigan*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 23.

place the activism of women at the center of their work rather than in the margins. This dissertation wishes to fill in the historical gap in the black freedom struggle by placing Canson's activism at the center of the narrative. However, I do not wish to overshadow the leadership but to add another vital leader in the movement. Furthermore, her story also reveals how people who never set out to become leaders of civil rights were pulled into activism because they were hindered by practices that impacted their access to the rights of full citizenship. Canson spent nearly fifty years of her life committed to racial equality because as she remarked later about her approach to civil rights injustices she stated, "Remember, to eat an elephant, you don't try to eat it all at once. You do it one bite at a time."⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Tracey Ross, "Sacramento's Virna Canson: Times are Just as Tough Now," *Sacramento Observer*, June 28, 1995, www.highbeam.com, (Accessed February 12, 2010).

Chapter 2

“Creating Our Own Land”

Black Sooners and the Establishment of Black Nationalism in Oklahoma

“Here the negro can rest from mob law, here he can be secure from every ill of the southern policies.” Edwin P. McCabe⁴⁶

In 1890, Fanny Frances Allan and her husband listened intently to a young man clad in a finely tailored-suit who told them about an exciting new opportunity in lands west of Mississippi. According to the agent, Indians once inhabited the area but they had given up their land and the time was right for southern blacks to move into the territory. The lands were reasonably priced and the founders of Langston City had a unique vision that appealed to Fanny. The founders wanted to establish an all-black colony where blacks would live in a self-segregated community. Langston City would allow blacks to live in an environment free from the intimidating practices and brutality that existed in the South. Fanny’s mind pondered the possibilities Langston City held for her and her family. In their current condition, her family struggled to make ends meet and she desired a better life for her children.

Fanny was born in 1841 to slave parents in Sardis, Mississippi and throughout her life she was forced to navigate the tumultuous racial landscape. She wanted better opportunities for her children, but their living conditions and racial environs made it impossible. Fanny, her husband and seven of her nine children boarded a train and left Mississippi for Langston City. Their journey took several days and ended in the territory’s

⁴⁶ Edwin P. McCabe, *Topeka Call*, April 24, 1891,1.

capital, Guthrie. Unfortunately, the train tracks ended in Guthrie and travelers had to traverse the remaining thirteen miles to Langston City by foot or wagon. The Allan family had only saved enough money for their train fare and they did not have enough to purchase a wagon or wagon fare. When they stepped off the train they entered a chaotic scene where they found hundreds of other families stuck in Guthrie. There was no place for them to stay in town so they were forced to take refuge in an empty boxcar at the edge of the train station for the evening. Fanny did not know what their future held but during the course of the night she heard rumors about lands just beyond Guthrie opening for settlement. They woke up the next morning and saw hundreds of people running from the train station with hunting sticks with torn squares of red fabric at the end and she knew the rumors were true. Similar to the Allan family, thousands of black southerners entered the territory ready to claim their piece of the American Dream, where they could live in their own autonomous communities and escape racial persecution.⁴⁷

The opening of the Oklahoma territory changed the demographics of the territory overnight. Thousands of eager settlers made the perilous journey to Oklahoma with hopes of owning land and making fortunes. While historical narratives detail how white Americans, called Sooners, rushed into the territory, fewer historians have noted the establishment of all-black towns.⁴⁸ These towns, which some blacks called “freedom colonies,” became part of a longer historical trajectory where blacks established autonomous communities. All-black towns gave blacks the opportunity to control social,

⁴⁷ Interview of Fanny Frances Allen by Ruth E. Moon, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.

<http://digital.libraries.ou.edu/whc/pioneer/paper.asp?pID=103&vID=2>

⁴⁸ It should be noted all-black towns and communities emerged in other states as well and provided the same sorts of opportunities for blacks. However, this dissertation focuses on Oklahoma because of the connection to Virna Canson. The sheer number of all-black towns in the state allowed for the growth of strong black institutional development.

political, and economic institutions. They hold an important place in the overall narrative of the black freedom struggle because they became important sites for the training of the next generation of black leaders and provided the next generation with the tools necessary for becoming activists. In his work on Oklahoma, David Chang eloquently argued, “For African American settlers from the South, it represented the hope to establish themselves as a truly free and politically empowered race within the American nation.”⁴⁹ Oklahoma offered more than just a promise of land for black emigrants but offered an opportunity for true freedom and access to the rights associated with citizenship.

This chapter examines Oklahoma because of its unique connection to Canson and her work as a civil rights leader in California. Oklahoma’s larger relationship to California may seem unlikely; however, the link between Oklahoma and California is critical in this study because black migrants moved to both states believing they would finally have full citizenship. Due to this hope, blacks fought to create a land where their ideals were not only accepted but dominated the political and social landscape. They wanted to see their ways of life flourish in their new home states.⁵⁰ As a young person, Canson never imagined she would emerge as a leader in the struggle for civil rights in the Golden State. However, her background and ties to all-black towns in Oklahoma created a unique racial environment

⁴⁹ David Chang, *The Color of the Land: Race, Nation, and the Politics of Landownership in Oklahoma, 1832-1929* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 7.

⁵⁰ The idea of access to full citizenship began during the revolutionary era and continued to grow after that time. A work examining the growth of full citizenship is Stephen Kantrowitz’s *More than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829-1889* (New York: Penguin, 2013). Sociologist, Mozell Hill was the first scholar to examine black towns and he argued all-black towns were the “result of a social movement in which Negroes were attempting to solve the race problem.” His works were: “The All-Negro Communities of Oklahoma: The Natural History of a Social Movement,” *Journal of Negro History* 31(July 1946); “A Comparative Analysis of the Social Organization of the All-Negro Society in Oklahoma,” *Social Forces* 25: No. 1(October 1926); and “A Comparative Study of Race Attitudes in the All-Negro Community in Oklahoma,” *Phylon* (1940-1956), 7 (3rd Qtr. 1946).

that gave her with the tools to become the “Mother of the Civil Rights Movement” in the West.⁵¹ Canson grew up in a black middle class family surrounded by the ideals of black middle class respectability, where girls were trained to help and uplift their community. According to historian Stephanie Shaw, black women, “did not stumble upon these leadership roles accidentally; nor were they, in general, born to them, but they were a product of years of formal and informal training.”⁵² In order to understand her activism in California, it is important to connect the larger multi-generational movement that began at the end of Reconstruction with the migration to Oklahoma and ended in the 1940s and 50s when individuals moved to California in search of a land where they could establish their own political, economic, and social community.

Land of Hope

Oklahoma represented a promised land for thousands of Americans who struggled to thrive economically in the post Civil War economy. For decades, Americans were not allowed to settle in the territory because the land was designated as Indian Territory. In the 1830s, the government focused on a policy of removal and thousands of Native Americans east of the Mississippi were moved to the territory because they believed land hungry Americans could not coexist with Native peoples. The Five Civilized Tribes, which consisted of the Choctaw, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek and Seminole, were moved to Oklahoma. The government deemed the region as too arid and treeless for white

⁵¹ This dissertation is building off Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo’s work, *Abiding Courage: African American Migrant Women and the East Bay Community* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1996). She argued women from Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Oklahoma; all experienced different forms of Jim Crow and came armed with the knowledge of how the political process was supposed to work. They continually fought against practices that mimicked Jim Crow in the Bay Area because they believed their children, husbands and the next generation-deserved equality.

⁵² Stephanie J. Shaw, *What Women Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Workers During the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 211.

settlement and; thus, suitable for an Indian Territory.⁵³ In return for their “voluntary” removal, the government outlined in the Treaty of New Echota that the lands ceded to the Cherokees would not be included within the territorial limits or jurisdiction of any State or Territory.⁵⁴ This agreement did not prevent Americans from entering the territory and early settlers discovered Oklahoma was not just an arid desert and had miles of lush green cultivatable prairie land. These fertile lands attracted thousands of land hungry Americans and they called for the opening of the lands. In addition, Boomers, the term used for settlers who illegally claimed land, became a nuisance for U.S. Infantry who expended a great deal of their time trying to keep settlers out of the territory.⁵⁵ The government grew tired of preserving the territory for Native Americans and opened the lands in 1889. The opening of the territory brought in young men who came in search of adventure, land speculators, and families who saw the territory as a new beginning.⁵⁶

The land rush included thousands of White settlers but also involved thousands of black settlers. Black Sooners came to the territory by wagon, horse and train and they had

⁵³ Some scholars who discuss this process of removal are: Dee Brown, *Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (New York: Holt McDougal, 2007); Theda Perdue and Michael Green, *The Cherokee Nation and the Trail of Tears* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008); and John Ehle, *Trail of Tears: The Rise and Fall of the Cherokee Nation* (New York: Anchor, 2011).

⁵⁴ In his work, Charles J. Kappler, *Indian Treaties, 1778-1883* (New York: Interland Publishers, 1972), explains the land was inhabited by the Five Civilized Tribes who to be given complete sovereignty over their territory. In terms of the Treaty of New Echota, the United States promised the lands ceded to the Cherokees, “shall in no future time, without their consent, be included within the territorial limits or jurisdiction of any State or Territory.” In addition to the Treaty of New Echota the Oklahoma stayed closed to pioneers because the land was designated as Indian Lands under the Indian Intercourse Acts. It should be noted the Indian Intercourse Act was a series of statutes passed by Congress in 1790, 1793, 1796, 1799, 1802, and 1834 to regulate commerce and land with Native Peoples. In addition the Five Civilized Tribes were given complete sovereignty over their territory.

⁵⁵ Ranchers used the unassigned lands during the Civil War because ranchers from Texas had to use the Chisholm Trail to move their cattle. Some of the ranchers realized the land was ideal for cattle grazing and moved into the area without any legal authority.

⁵⁶ Americans had already moved into the area, these individuals were called Boomers. Boomers went into the Unassigned Lands and the U.S. Cavalry tried to keep them out of the lands.

their own vision of life in Oklahoma's fertile valleys. They were on a larger quest in search of their piece of the American Dream, where they could own land and have economic, political, and social freedom. They were part of a larger All- Black Town Movement that pushed for the establishment of segregated black towns, positioned far away from white authority, where they could practice self-reliance and self-governance.⁵⁷ These towns developed into bastions of black culture, government, economics and community and allowed for the growth of Black Nationalism well before Marcus Garvey's Black Nationalist movement.⁵⁸ They became important sites for providing the training for future generations of activists who continued the fight for equality.

Oklahoma seemed like a logical place for the creation of all-black towns because of the abundance of land and the existence of blacks in the territory already.⁵⁹ The population consisted primarily of Native peoples, the Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw and the Seminoles. However, there was also a black population in the territory because several of the Native nations brought slaves with them into the territory.⁶⁰ In addition, white southerners fled the South and moved to Oklahoma with slaves before the end of the Civil

⁵⁷ Donald H. Henderson, "Causes of Recent Negro Migration," *Journal of Negro History* 6 (October 1921): 410-415.

⁵⁸ The development of Black Nationalism came before the more recognized movement led by Marcus Garvey. All-black colonies were key in the proliferation of Black Nationalism and a some of the more notable works on the subject during the antebellum period are: Theodore Draper, *The Rediscovery of Black Nationalism* (New York: Penguin Books, 1970); Sterling Stuckey, ed., *The Ideological Origins of Black Nationalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972); V.P. Franklin, *Black Self-Determination: A Cultural History of the Faith of the Fathers* (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill Books, 1984); and Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

⁵⁹ The relationship between blacks and Native Americans was complex and some historians who discuss this relationship include: Tiya Miles, *Ties that Bind: The Story of an Afro-American Family in Slavery and Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Claudio Saunt, *Black White and Indian: Race and the Unmaking of Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Fay Ann Yarborough, *Race and Cherokee Nation: Sovereignty in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

⁶⁰ Murray R. Wickett, *Contested Territory: Whites, Native Americans, and African Americans in Oklahoma, 1865-1907* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000).

War in order to avoid freeing their slaves. However, the end of the Civil War and the passage of the 13th amendment meant an end to slavery even within the territory. The Five Civilized Tribes, except for the Chickasaws, freed their slaves and made them citizens with equal rights and access to ownership of tribal land. Southerners in the territory also freed their slaves. Freed blacks in Oklahoma had a distinct advantage because there was an abundance of cheap land, which allowed them to establish their own farms.⁶¹ In addition, these freed blacks had a unique position in the territory because many of the locals viewed these blacks, freed by Native Americans and southerners, as Native people. Booker T. Washington discovered this when he visited Boley, Oklahoma in 1905. He wrote about his trip and he described his surprise when he asked to meet with someone who was Native and was brought to the home of a black settler he remarked, "... 'natives' are the descendants of slaves Indians brought with them from Alabama and Mississippi when they migrated to this Territory."⁶² The existence of a black population already in the territory encouraged promoters that blacks were accepted and that they already had allies within the territory.

Oklahoma was appealing to blacks because they wanted to escape the Jim Crow South. However, their migration out of the South was also part of a larger mission to establish freedom through the formation of self-segregated communities. They lived through the Civil War and Reconstruction and knew freedom from slavery and the passage of federal amendments did not translate into access to the rights of full citizenship and racial equality. During the early years of Reconstruction, many blacks believed that

⁶¹ In 1898, the Five Civilized Tribes received under the Curtis Act and freed blacks from the tribes also received allotments.

⁶² "Boley, A Negro Town in the West," The Booker T. Washington Papers, Vol. 9, (January 1908): 431.

freedom from slavery and the passage of federal amendments meant permanent changes.⁶³ Their optimism was supported by record numbers of black politicians elected to offices at both the local and state levels. In addition, the federal government's continued intervention in the South after the war showed the government was dedicated to their cause. For example, the Freedman's Bureau, which helped reunite families, formed black armies of occupation, gave abandoned and confiscated lands to newly freed blacks, supported black's perceptions that the federal government was committed to racial equality.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, as time progressed blacks realized racial equality required more than the passage of federal legislation and short-term federal intervention.

As Reconstruction continued the federal government's presence in the South dwindled. Moreover, the federal government never had enough troops stationed throughout the South to maintain social order. White southerners remained steadfast in their devotion to keeping blacks relegated to the lowest rungs of the economic ladder and the lack of consistent governmental intervention allowed White southerners to resurrect a plantation society, where whites maintained their position as masters.⁶⁵ Desperate planters and farmers, who were prosperous before the Civil War, looked for ways to restore slavery and

⁶³ The 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments were passed to ensure that individuals were freed, had equal protection under the law, and were allowed to vote.

⁶⁴ An in depth analysis of the complex shift from slavery to freed people in the South and how people on both sides struggled with the transition is Leon Litwacks' *Been in the Storm so Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Vintage, 1980).

⁶⁵ James Roark discusses the continuation of the plantation society after the Civil War in his work, *Masters Without Slaves: Southern Planters in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977). He describes southern planters viewed a plantation society as an organic and conservative, hierarchical and chivalric society that viewed blacks as workers. Other works describing Black-White relations in the South during Reconstruction are: J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restrictions and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880-1910* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); Joel Williamson, *Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); and William Cohen, *At Freedom's Edge: Black Mobility and the Southern White Quest for Racial Control, 1861-1915* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1991).

introduced sharecropping and tenant farming. Both sharecropping and tenant farming provided freed people with land to farm in exchange for a portion of their crop. Landowners did not have to provide any sort of payment, food, or shelter within these arrangements.⁶⁶ These agreements were less than ideal for newly freed blacks because a principal obstacle that faced them was the lack of capital necessary to start farming. In order to establish their farms, black farmers were forced to take loans from landowners. Landowners established the terms for repayment of these loans and these terms seldom favored the farmer and led to a cycle of indebtedness and left blacks beholden to the landowner until the debt was paid.⁶⁷

Besides the formation of new labor arrangements designed to reproduce slavery, devious local and state politicians passed new statutes, known as Black Codes, which also helped to reconstruct the racial caste system of slavery.⁶⁸ Based upon previous slave laws, Black Codes limited the scope and effectiveness of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments. Many states passed harsh criminal codes and allowed for the legal re-enslavement of blacks. For example, vagrancy laws were one of easiest ways for southerners to re-enslave blacks because these laws allowed authorities to arrest individuals for perceived idleness

⁶⁶ Some of the most egregious Black Codes were vagrancy laws stated a black was a vagrant if they were unable to prove they were employed or lacked a permanent resident. These individuals were arrested and sent out to work on labor farms such as Parchman Farm. A few of the notable works that discuss the stripping away of the federal amendments with the passage of Black Codes are: David Oshinsky, *Worse than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York: Free Press, 1997); Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Reenslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: First Anchor Books, 2008).

⁶⁷ The history of sharecropping in the South has been covered by Edward Royce, *The Origins of Southern Sharecropping* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993) and Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction: From Slave to Wage Laborer in South Carolina, 1860-1870* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁶⁸ Black Codes originally emerged in the North and then were passed in the South. Several exemplars of the history of Black Codes and the law in the South are: J. Douglas Smith, *Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) and Michael J. Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

and criminalized unemployment. In addition, statutes known as Pig Laws unfairly penalized poor blacks for minor crimes such as the stealing of farm animals. Under Pig Laws, individuals received harsh sentences and fines, which led to the imprisonment of countless numbers of blacks. Southern states did not have enough facilities to house inmates and they developed a convict leasing system. The convict leasing system allowed local planters and industrialists to lease convicts for minimal fees from the state. They were held responsible for housing and feeding the convicts but there were no other guidelines regulating the treatment of convicts. Given the profitability convict leasing had for the state and the supply of cheap labor for planters and industrialists, the convict leasing system led to the arrest of record numbers of blacks.⁶⁹ Historian Douglas Blackmon, called this practice a new American slavery where, "...free men, guilty of no crimes and entitled by law to freedom, were compelled to labor without compensation, were repeatedly bought and sold."⁷⁰

In addition to the passage of Black Codes, violence against blacks escalated throughout the South. White supremacists looked for ways to remove Republicans from office and formed political and social organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, Knights of the White Camellia, the White League and the Red Shirts. Under the veil of darkness and hoods, they centered their activities on tactics of intimidation and violence towards blacks who failed to acquiesce to white authority.⁷¹ White southerners refused to accept blacks as their equals and when they had their opportunity they seized control of the political reigns.

⁶⁹ David Oshinsky's *Worse than Slavery* detailed how harsh criminal codes emerged from white reaction to black crime. After the war, some states wanted to bring back the gallows for serious property crimes and whipping posts for misdemeanors. Some southerners operated outside of the law and took matters into their own hands and lynched perceived criminals.

⁷⁰ Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name*, 4.

⁷¹ David Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press:1965,1981). Vigilante groups sought the restoration of social order where blacks returned to the fields and whites were in dominant power positions.

This moment came for them with the presidential election of 1877. As the nation moved toward rebuilding the country, the North's commitment to political and social equality for blacks wavered. The North was never fully dedicated to the political and social equality of blacks and allowed white southerners recreated systems mimicking slavery.⁷² The presidential election of 1877 provided White southerners with the opportunity to completely dismantle any remaining traces of Reconstruction. The Corrupt Bargain settled the presidential election and led to the withdrawal of federal troops in the South. The agreement also sent a clear message to southern blacks that their political voice did not matter.

Despite the end of Reconstruction, blacks remained steadfast to preserving their freedoms. William Du Bois argued Reconstruction did not represent an epilogue to the Civil War, but was, "the beginning of a longer journey to freedom for African Americans."⁷³ Black southerners were unwilling to hand over power to former slave owners and responded in a number of ways to the end of Reconstruction. Black southerners feared the end of Reconstruction signaled the loss of their land, legal rights, access to education and voting. By this time, they witnessed the slow removal of their rights while the federal government remained as a military presence and they were afraid what might happen without any federal enforcement. Against the backdrop of Jim Crow policies they had

⁷² Radical Reconstruction and a commitment to racial equality by the nation during this time period remained an unobtainable goal. There were only ever a small minority of Republicans, the "Radicals" such as Congressman Thaddeus Stevens and Senator Charles Sumner, who wanted the nation to commit to a goal of racial equality. Several historians who have discussed this period and social and political thought surrounding racial equality are: Richard M. Velely, *The Two Reconstructions: The Struggle for Black Enfranchisement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) and Richard L. Hume and Jerry B. Gough, *Blacks, Carpetbaggers, and Scalawags: The Constitutional Conventions of Radical Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008).

⁷³ W.E.B. Du Bois wrote about the period of Reconstruction in his work *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Free Press, 1970, 1999) where he examined how Blacks realized the enormity of their freedom and seized temporary control in some state legislatures.

limited access in politics, employment and public accommodations in the South and blacks struggled to create places of their own.⁷⁴ Some black southerners believed the only way to achieve access to full citizenship was by leaving the South.⁷⁵

The Exodus

From the 1870s to the 1890s, wave after wave of blacks left in search of freedom in lands west of the Mississippi. Scholars such as Nell Irvin Painter, who looked at blacks who migrated out of the South to Kansas, compared their journey to the biblical exodus of the Israelites out of Egypt and these migrants became known as Exodusters.⁷⁶ In the book of Exodus, Yahweh promised the Israelites a Promised Land flowing with milk and honey, called Canaan, because of their devotion to God. The Hebrew's journey to Canaan was fraught with difficulty and took several decades to complete much like the black journey for freedom. Similar to the exodus of the Hebrews, the Exodusters fled horrific conditions in search of their own "Promised Land," a land free from oppression and discrimination.⁷⁷ Black settlers left the South and escaped poverty, injustice, and discrimination.⁷⁸ One descendant of an Exoduster, Ethel Moore remarked in an oral interview that her family ended up in Kansas because they were merely, "seeking a place to stay after they were

⁷⁴ Weiss, *Places of Their Own*, 8.

⁷⁵ Some black leaders in the South condemned the emigrationist movement because some doubted new lands would provide them with the freedoms they desired and they feared a dwindling population would further diminish any political power they still had. Steven Hahn discusses this fear in his work, *A Nation Under our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (New York: Belknap Press, 2005).

⁷⁶ Nell Irvin Painter's work *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977, 1992 reprint) remains one of the best works on the Exoduster Movement.

⁷⁷ This Exoduster movement was shorter than the first and second Great Migrations that occurred later however, where black southerners were fleeing the Jim Crow South in hopes of finding a land filled with opportunities.

⁷⁸ Norman Crockett makes this argument in his work *The Black Towns* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1979).

free.”⁷⁹ Accounts of their exodus suggest blacks fled the South with nothing more than the cloths on their backs and established short lived all-black towns.

Historians of all-black communities showed how all-black towns were experiments in self-segregation and self-preservation. However, many of these early histories describe the rise and inevitable decline of these towns and overlook the longer historical legacy these towns held for subsequent generations. The All-Black Town Movement embodied more than movement from the South, but also represented a larger movement connected to settler colonization. Black settlers sought to claim and transform their places through autonomous sovereignty.⁸⁰ They entered the Oklahoma territory with the dedication to establish all-black towns and envisioned self-segregated communities promoted and embraced black culture, politics, economics and community development.⁸¹ Moreover, their migration was a calculated effort by individuals that possessed the education, skills and economic resources to dominant politics, economics and social interactions in their communities.⁸²

⁷⁹ Ethel Moore, Oral Interview, Conducted by Curtis Nether in June of 1977, Lawrence/Douglas County African American Oral History Interviews.

⁸⁰ This dissertation is employing a definition of settler colonization outlined by Adam Barker in his article “Locating Settler Colonialism,” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 13, no. 3 (Winter 2012). There are other definitions of Settler Colonialism that cover a multitude of colonization experiences some of these works are Patrick Wolfe, Lorenzo Veraccini, etc.

⁸¹ Historians of all-black communities have shown how all-black colonies were experiments in self-segregation ensuring self-preservation. However many of these early histories suggest these towns were doomed to fail and overlook the longer historical legacy these towns had upon those who grew up in these environments.

⁸² It should be noted several migration/colonization efforts to establish all-black settlements surfaced prior to this time period. There were several efforts spearheaded by organizations such as the American Colonization Society argued the best chance for blacks was to export blacks to other countries like Liberia and Haiti. Marcus Garvey also supported black only settlement and established the Black Star Line to facilitate this process, however legal troubles prevented the completion of his project. Much of the work focuses on the removal of free blacks as a way to deal to exit an oppressive environment and do not focus on the fact black settlers were using exodus as a way to ensure they could create their own political, economic and social landscape. A few works that outline this process are: E. David Cronon and John Hope Franklin, *Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Madison: University of

Promoters behind the movement urged blacks to move into Oklahoma by organizing emigration companies that sent agents into the major southern cities. These field agents went from town to town and spoke about how the territory was a promised land where people could have independence, freedom, and their own land. While these companies' primary motivation was to make money, they also realized Oklahoma could become a bastion of freedom for thousands of oppressed blacks. W.L. Eagleson, one of the most prolific promoters, proclaimed Oklahoma had a favorable climate and an abundance of water. He declared, "There was never a more favorable time than now for you to secure good homes in a land where you will be free and your rights respected."⁸³ Promoters saw the potential for the formation of all-black towns and believed Oklahoma could become the first all-black state. Boosters saw the opening of the territory as an opportunity to establish a black presence where they could have political power and blacks realized that they could live in their own racial utopias.⁸⁴

Promoters of all-black towns had years of previous experience in town development and used this knowledge to meticulously plan the location of town sites. Edwin P. McCabe, another well-known promoter of the territory, had an extensive background in promotion and real estate speculation from his involvement in Nicodemus, an all-black town established in Kansas. McCabe participated in the settlement of Nicodemus and he believed he could learn from the mistakes made in the town. He saw more possibilities for the

Wisconsin Press, 1960) and Erin Burin, *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution: A History of the American Colonization Society* (Gainesville, FLA: University Press of Florida, 2008).

⁸³ "Negroes for Oklahoma," *Columbus Daily Herald*, July 9, 1889, 1.

⁸⁴ I found while I was doing research on these towns promoters and those individuals who moved into Oklahoma used the term all-black colony and freedom colonies more often than they used the term all-black town. One work that discusses all-black towns in the terms of black colony and freedoms colonies is, Thad Sitton and James H. Conrad, *Freedom Colonies: Independent Black Texans in the Time of Jim Crow* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).

successful creation of all-black towns in Oklahoma. He rallied other men to his side and formed the Oklahoma Immigration Association (OIA). Before the lands were officially opened, the OIA went into the territory to pick out suitable land for the establishment of their all-black towns. The association sent out a reconnaissance committee of over fifty delegates that surveyed the eastern portions of the Oklahoma territory. They searched for land sites that were capable of sustaining a population of at least a half a million people and were also cultivatable. Their work did not go unnoticed and papers carried stories about their mission. For example, *The Kinsley Mercury*, based in Kansas, reported on the committee and stated the purpose of the mission was a suitable place in Oklahoma where, “southern negroes can migrate to escape prejudices and persecutions to which they are continually subjected.”⁸⁵

After the OIA’s investigation the committee recommended the establishment of two communities: one named Langston City after John Mercer Langston a well regarded black scholar and congressman from Virginia and the other town they named Liberty, in Noble County.⁸⁶ These land sites were ideal because they possessed fertile land and were close to the railways. In addition, these sites were situated near other towns, which would allow residents to sell crops and conduct other business. After choosing the location the OIA drew up community plans that included black run banks, schools and businesses. Drawing from the experiences of Nicodemus, the OIA realized they needed to attract the right type of black settlers. Nicodemus struggled because too many blacks came without the economic

⁸⁵ *The Kinsley Mercury*, September 3, 1891, 1.

⁸⁶ Liberty was not as successful as Langston in development. Several hundred individuals were supposed to come from Mississippi and the Santa Fe Railway built a train depot on the town site. Despite promotional efforts and the train depot the town only existed for a short time.

means necessary to maintain the growth of the town.⁸⁷ The OIA focused their recruitment efforts on attracting educated and skilled southern blacks with enough economic resources to sustain the continued development of the towns. McCabe and the OIA envisioned a frontier settlement where blacks dominated the population and controlled their own political systems and this would only be possible with individuals who had skills and resources.⁸⁸

Promoters used a variety of methods for recruiting the right type of black settlers into Oklahoma. They wanted at least 15,000 settlers ready when the lands opened to stake claims so they would have enough of an early presence in the territory to progress into an all-black state.⁸⁹ The primary tool they utilized for promoting the territory were black newspapers. After the Civil War, black newspapers became one of the strongest institutions in black America.⁹⁰ The explosion of black newspapers came about from an increase in literacy and mobility among blacks and became an important tool for providing not only information but served as an organ of protest.⁹¹ Promoters used newspapers already established in Kansas and also created newspapers in each of the all-black towns to continue advertising the territory. Articles and advertisements focused on three main themes to attract settlers into Oklahoma; they promised an environment where individuals could raise crops, they argued settlers would have full citizenship rights, and they compared the land to paradise.

⁸⁷ Roy L. Brooks, *Integration or Separation?: A Strategy for Racial Equality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 177.

⁸⁸ There are a few works on McCabe's colonization movement these are: Jimmy Lewis Franklin, *Journey Toward Hope: A History of Blacks in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982) and Jere W. Robeson, "Edward P. McCabe and the Langston Experiment," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 51(Fall 1973).

⁸⁹ Lonnie E. Underhill and Daniel F. Littlefield, Jr., "Black Dreams and 'Free Homes: The Oklahoma Territory, 1891-1894," *Phylon* 34, no. 4 (1973): 342.

⁹⁰ *The Black Press: Soldiers Without Swords*, 177

⁹¹ "The Story of the African American Press," *The Crisis*, July/August 1999, 46.

Promoters realized blacks stuck in the cycle of sharecropping and tenant-leasing arrangements wanted to break free from this cycle. They marketed the ability of blacks to own land and fulfill an ideology of economic uplift in the territory.⁹² They capitalized on black southerners desire to establish their own autonomy and argued that, “Langston is the most promising town in the west. Men with have a few hundred dollars; have the opportunity to have a home and business.”⁹³ More importantly, promoters focused on the agricultural potential of the land and newspapers gave reports on crop yields to demonstrate the cultivability of the land. For instance, the *Davenport Leader* had monthly reports of crop yields. The reports were glowing and numbers led individuals to believe that they would not only have enough for their family but also to sell at market. For example in one monthly report the paper stated, “ An Oklahoman county man claims a yield of 200 bushels per acre on potatoes. Walnuts and pecan trees are loaded with nuts this year.”⁹⁴ The crop reports appealed to black farmers in the South who were struggling to even reach their yearly commitments to landowners.

Promoters knew black southerners wanted to escape the violence in the South and marketed the town’s peaceful environment. Promotional articles in newspapers focused on selling the idea of towns free from white rule. One account found in *The Herald* proclaimed, “Here the negro can rest from mob law, here he can be secure from every ill of the southern policies.”⁹⁵ Other promotional pieces took it a step further and promised blacks that they could be the ruling class in Oklahoma. For example, one of the officers remarked:

⁹² Individuals such as Booker T. Washington promoted the ideology of economic uplift through agricultural ventures. Booker T. Washington believed the road for advancement lay within the agricultural and vocational sector. Leaders from the next generation criticized this approach but Booker T. Washington’s leadership reflected the historical realities he had endured.

⁹³ *Langston City Herald*, May 7, 1898,1

⁹⁴ *Davenport Leader*, Thursday, August 11, 1904, 1.

⁹⁵ *Langston City Herald*, 1.

“You must demand and see that your demands are enforced, full social equality; you must compel the white man to accept you at his table in his home and in his bed.”⁹⁶ Promoters did not shrink from their commitment to the establishment of black rule and used strong language in the newspapers to convey their position, and even maintained they would not, “permit a white man to be elected to any office whatever. We will rule.”⁹⁷

Many people responded to these promotional tactics and were drawn to the idea of living in a land free from white rule. Some compared this land to a racial utopia and used this type of language to describe the territory. For example, Reverend B.T. Foster supported the exodus of his church members from Mississippi to Oklahoma and said, “We look upon Oklahoma as our peaceful heaven, where political ostracism is unknown and where every man can cast the ballot of his choice without fear from any source.”⁹⁸ McCabe and Eagleson built upon the idea of a racial utopia and promoted this ideal in their newspaper called *The Herald*.⁹⁹ The paper was peppered with articles highlighting the lushness of the town and an environment where settlers had personal autonomy. These newspaper articles consistently used language that focused on the utopic qualities of the town and continually referred to Langston as a “paradise for colored people.”¹⁰⁰ McCabe’s colorful descriptions of the landscape often correlated to biblical terms and he suggested that Langston was, “the paradise of Eden and the garden of the Gods.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ *American Citizen*, Topeka, May 3, 1889.

⁹⁷ Kenneth Hamilton, “The Origins and Development of Langston, Oklahoma,” *The Journal of Negro History*, 62, No.3 (July 1977): 273.

⁹⁸ “Oklahoma Their Promised Land,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Jan. 3, 1891, 6.

⁹⁹ Brooks, *Integration or Separation?*, 178.

¹⁰⁰ *The Kinsley Mercury*, (Kansas), September 3, 1891, 1.

¹⁰¹ Martin Dann, “From Sodom to the Promised Land: E. P. McCabe and the Movement for Oklahoma Colonization,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* (Autumn 1974): 370-378.

Given the racial environment, leaving the South seemed like an easy decision. Yet, departure from the South was a difficult decision because of connections to family and place. Those who decided to leave were given large sendoffs from their communities. Promoters capitalized upon these sendoff parties and used them as another tool for promoting the territory. One paper reported, “The exodus of negroes for Oklahoma continues. One hundred and thirty of them left Saturday afternoon in twenty wagons laded with goods and provisions. Two thousand colored people gathered on the riverfront to cheer them on and say good-bye.”¹⁰² The act of leaving was portrayed as a moment of celebration and served as another powerful tool for marketing the territory. Black southerners responded to promoter’s tactics and left the South with the belief that they would have economic and political independence.

Lured in by the promoters, the black population quickly grew in Oklahoma. Black settlers were drawn to the territory because they wanted to be free from white control and domination. However, as blacks descended upon “newly opened” lands it was clear whites would contest their presence in the territory. Whites feared that increasing numbers could translate into a black majority and voiced their fears in rhetoric that focused on concern about the number of poor blacks entering the territory. They claimed that the territory could not sustain and care for all of the poor blacks coming in and that the government should control this movement. In 1891, *The New York Times* sent a representative into the territory to investigate these claims. However, their investigation revealed that many black settlers

¹⁰² “Negroes Going to Oklahoma,” *The Oswego Daily Palladium*, April 4, 1892, 2.

were not paupers but had substantial means. The paper reported, “ In one bank alone sums aggregating over 15,000 have been deposited by the negro settlers.”¹⁰³

Early black emigrants realized they needed to work together in order to claim land and establish self-sufficient towns. They envisioned Oklahoma as their promised land, but they also understood they needed to be vigilant in their efforts to stake their claims. In the weeks prior to the opening of the lands, thousands of blacks pitched their tents and were ready to take their lands. Black Sooners knew they might be met by violence and prepared themselves for confrontations.¹⁰⁴ The grab for land for black settlers was not without any dangers and newspaper accounts detailed several confrontations and killings. In one account from Langston the newspaper reported, “ Two negroes were killed in the new lands south of the negro colony, but no one seems to know how they died. Some say they shot each other in a quarrel over a claim, others that they were killed in a stampede, others by cowboys.”¹⁰⁵ Despite resistance to their entrance into the territory, black Sooners eagerly rolled up their sleeves and built the communities they envisioned.

The rapid growth of the black population in the territory came as a surprise to others in the territory. A report on a mass meeting held in Langston, suggested that the population of Langston increased from 1,000 to 1,500 black men within just a few weeks. Other communities, such as Boley, quickly grew and became the most populated all-black town in the Oklahoma territory.¹⁰⁶ Promoters used the success of Langston and other towns as marketing tools and black Sooners continued to enter territories when they read these

¹⁰³ “The Blacks in Oklahoma: Flocking to the Territory in Large Numbers.” *New York Times*, Apr. 9, 1891, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times, 9.

¹⁰⁴ *Daily Picayune*, September 22, 1891, 1.

¹⁰⁵ *The Leavenworth Times*, Kansas, September 23, 1891, 1.

¹⁰⁶ For more on the development of Boley, see this excellent dissertation by Melissa Stuckey, "All Men Up: Race, Rights and Power in the All-Town of Boley, Oklahoma, 1903-1939" (PhD. Diss. New Haven: Yale University, 2009).

accounts. In addition, when people moved to Oklahoma they wrote to their relatives about how wonderful life was in the territory, which brought in more inhabitants. However, black southerners moving into the territory were not naïve and knew the process of relocation and establishing all-black towns was fraught with difficulty, yet they were intoxicated by the promise of freedom and independence. They were also supported by newspaper accounts that painted pictures of prosperous lands. In a letter to the editor in the *Baptist World* a person who visited the territory for six weeks provided a glowing account of the region for other readers. She found the, “country to be a prosperous condition, the colored people are doing well. They have good crops of corn, watermelon, cotton, peas, etc. Some of them have handsome houses on their claims and have proved up and got their deeds” and she persuaded others to leave for the “Land of Opportunity.”¹⁰⁷ Black newspapers continued to emerge throughout Oklahoma and served as vital sources of information about the continued success of all-black towns and provide a window into the interactions between the inhabitants.

The establishment of all-black towns in the territory was alarming to whites in the territory that were intent on re-establishing white authoritarian rule. There was an uneasy racial harmony in the new territory because white settlers did not want to see black communities increase and attempted to limit interactions with black Sooners. However, prior to statehood in Oklahoma, blacks experienced more freedoms and found a more racially progressive environment. Perhaps the most noteworthy development of all-black towns in Oklahoma was the cultivation of strong community institutions. One of the most significant institutions to develop was schools. Parents were adamant that their children

¹⁰⁷ Mrs. Bessie Freeman, Works Progress Administration Interview by Field Worker Ruth E. Moon, Indian –Pioneer History Project, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma, 1.

receive a quality education where they had black role models. In Langston, the school was known throughout the area for having unwritten laws stating, “ No white man need apply.” In several communities, parents regularly attended school with their children in order to monitor their instruction and ensure they received appropriate education.¹⁰⁸

Parents also found ways to build and fund schools that focused on the educational needs of the black students. They were aided by the passage of the second Morrill Act of 1890. The Act served as a catalyst for the establishment of all-black colleges and universities throughout the country. The second Morrill Act extended the scope of the initial Morrill Land Act and required all states and territories to admit black students to land grant colleges or provide funding for the creation of a separate school.¹⁰⁹ States and territories that failed to comply with the act were at risk of losing federal funds.¹¹⁰ In 1892, three citizens in Langston realized they could have their own college and approached the Territorial Council about building a college in the town. They received support from several politicians for building a black college and in 1897 Representative William Gault introduced House Bill 151, which allowed for the creation of the Colored Agricultural and Normal University (CANU). CANU first began in 1898 and classes began in the Presbyterian Church and in Langston’s public school. The school focused on providing

¹⁰⁸ A brief description of the Langston schools and their policies were found written in: Blanche E. Little, “ Catholic Schools for Indians in the Oklahoma and Indian Territories,” *The Indian Advocate* (October 1, 1899): 102.

¹⁰⁹ Second Morrill Act of 1890, United States Department of Agriculture
<http://www.csrees.usda.gov/about/offices/legis/secondmorrill.html>

¹¹⁰ The Second Morrill Act was primarily aimed at former Confederate states and led to the creation of all-black colleges throughout the nation.

students with several areas of studies and included an industrial and agricultural curriculum, a teacher's college, and a liberal arts curriculum.¹¹¹

Preserving Freedom

The racial climate of Oklahoma changed when it transitioned from a territory to a state. Evidence of the shift manifested itself in the earliest meetings of the Oklahoma Constitutional Conventions. In 1906, delegates convened to draw up the state's constitution and one of the most heated debates centered on the political place of blacks in the state. At the convention, the delegate's main concern was whether or not segregation should be included in the state's constitution. The Democrats promised to separate the races and Republicans voiced their commitment to limiting interactions between whites and blacks. Republicans openly advocated for segregation within schools and wanted the constitution to also include a prohibition of mixed marriages.¹¹² Both parties agreed that they did not want to do "any injustice to the negro" and wanted to protect his "real rights" but did not view blacks as their political equals.¹¹³ Several representatives cited President Roosevelt's dismissal of a regiment of black troops as reason for black political and social exclusion. At the convention, one representative noted:

As a rule they are failures as lawyers, doctors and in other professions. He must be taught in the line of his own sphere, as porters, bootblacks and barbers and many

¹¹¹ For more on the creation of Langston, please see, Zella J. Black Patterson with Lynette L. Wert, *Langston University: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979) and Willis L. Brown and Janie M. McNeal-Brown, "Oklahoma's First Comprehensive University: Langston University the Early Years," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 74 (Spring 1996): 30-49.

¹¹² Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of the Proposed State of Oklahoma, Held at Guthrie, Oklahoma, November 20, 1906 to November 16, 1907 (Muskogee, Oklahoma: Muskogee Ptg. Co, 1907), 21.
https://openlibrary.org/books/OL17991257M/Proceedings_of_the_Constitutional_Convention_of_the_proposed_state_of_Oklahoma

¹¹³ Ibid.

lines of agriculture, horticulture, and mechanics in which he is adept, but it is an entirely false notion that the negro can rise to the equal of a white man in the professions or become an equal citizen to grapple with public questions.¹¹⁴

In 1907, Oklahoma's transition to statehood changed the political, racial, and societal environment of blacks within the state. White lawmakers moved to replicate the racial environment of the South and make black Oklahomans second-class citizens. Lawmakers used the 1896 court decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson* as their legal basis for including segregation and separate schools within the state constitution. In addition, Oklahoma's constitution originally franchised blacks, but in 1910 the state legislature amended the constitution to strip away the vote. Similar to southern states, they introduced a literacy test provision and included a "grandfather clause." The grandfather clause exempted voters from the literacy test if they were descendants of citizens eligible to vote on January 1, 1866.¹¹⁵ White Oklahoma lawmakers, many who had come to the state from the South, utilized the same legal tactics used by the Jim Crow South to circumvent federal laws.

Black Oklahomans were unwilling to part with their freedoms and joined forces to fight against the encroachment of White supremacy. The state had a significant number of highly educated blacks that knew how to navigate the legal waters. They organized outside of the Republican Party and formed the Inter-Territorial Negro Protective League and worked together to protect their rights and political interests.¹¹⁶ Black citizens found ways to dismantle the new state's constitutional limitations and used the court system to their advantage. Some of the all-black towns took the opportunity to twist segregation around

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ The year 1866 was chosen because this was election was prior to the passage of the 15th Amendment in 1869.

¹¹⁶ Stuckey, "All Men Up," 66.

and reversed white racial practices in their towns. For example, in Mound Bayou, Oklahoma the railway station had a “colored waiting room” and a “white waiting room” and they decided to switch the locations of the waiting rooms. Colored waiting rooms in train stations were always placed at the near of the building and did not offer the same amenities as white waiting rooms. However, they switched the locations of the waiting rooms and placed the colored waiting room in the front of the building and situated the white room at the rear of the building.¹¹⁷

After the passage of the Grandfather Clause, black Oklahomans looked for ways to overturn the law. They complained directly to President William H. Taft because they were still connected the Republican Party to Lincoln and believed they had an advocate with Taft. In addition, the NAACP decided to challenge Oklahoma’s Grandfather Clause and filed suit.¹¹⁸ Disturbed by the state’s desire to strip away the black democratic vote in the state, Republican U.S. District Attorney John Emory brought up criminal charges against two elections officials under the 1870 Ku Klux Klan Act.¹¹⁹ He wanted officials brought up on charges for creating a violent and discriminatory atmosphere in the 1910 elections. The case found its way all the way to the Supreme Court and *Guinn v. United States* became the first case since the end of Reconstruction to focus on the voting rights of blacks.¹²⁰

President Taft finally realized he needed the votes of black Oklahomans and put the Justice Department behind the suit.

In 1915, the Supreme Court reached a surprising decision in *Guinn v. United States* and struck down the “grandfather clause” in Oklahoma. The court ruled the two Oklahoma

¹¹⁷ “Mound Bayou a Lively City,” *Afro-American*, March 15, 1913, 1.

¹¹⁸ Kermit L. Hall, *The Oxford Guide to United States Supreme Court Decisions* (New York: Oxford University Press), 120.

¹¹⁹ Hall, *The Oxford Guide*, 210.

¹²⁰ *Guinn v. United States*, 238 U.S. 347 (1915)

election officers committed a federal crime because they fraudulently deprived blacks the right to vote in general elections.¹²¹ This was a significant victory for blacks throughout the nation because it was the first time the Supreme Court struck down a disfranchising device.¹²² *Guinn* became the legal basis for other cases concerning grandfather type clauses. The state accepted the court's decision and took out the grandfather clause, but found other ways to disenfranchise the black voter. The state legislator passed a statute exempting anyone who voted in the 1914 election from the requirements of registration. In addition, the legislator implemented a twelve-day period for all others to register and if individuals failed to register within this twelve-day window they permanently lost the right to vote.¹²³

Black settlers found loopholes within the constitution and used them to reinforce their institutional development. The black towns in the state spent a significant amount of money and time establishing good schools for their children and did not want the state to supersede their activities. In Lima, Oklahoma black residents fought against the segregation of schools by reversing the language and qualifications for determining the "colored" school from the "white school." Lima was an all-black town located in Seminole County that grew because of its location on the convergence of the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific Railroads. The town benefitted from the generous funding of the Julius Rosenwald Foundation and used the money to build a large brick school for their children. Julius Rosenwald was the president of Sears, Roebuck and Company from 1910-1925 and

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² The significance of court cases in the fight for freedom is detailed in Adam Fairclough's *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890-2000* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001).

¹²³ Harry F. Tepker, "The Dean Takes His Stand: Julian Monnet's 1912 Harvard Law Review Article Denouncing Oklahoma's Discriminatory Grandfather Clause," *Oklahoma Law Review* 62:3 (2010): 427-448. The Supreme Court eventually struck down this law as well but that did not happen until twenty-three years later.

established the fund in 1917 with the goal of building schools throughout the nation.¹²⁴

Residents of Lima wanted their school to receive the designation of the district school because the majority of the students were blacks; there were 232 black students and only 16 whites. The state refused to give the school the designation and residents filed a lawsuit, *Moore v. Porterfield*, because they wanted state monies allocated to the town's all-black school. The petitioners alleged:

The negro school is and has been the district school of said district from the advent of statehood, and the white school has been the separate school; that the plaintiffs constitute a majority of the school board of said district, having been elected at the regular annual election held for that purpose by the negroes of said district; that the scholastic census of said school district shows 232 negro and 16 white children of school age; that there are 103 negro and 7 white families who reside in said school district.¹²⁵

In *Moore v. Porterfield* the court ruled the black school receive the district school designation and any white school be counted as the "colored" school. This established the financial basis for the school and cemented the dominance of black leadership in the school and community.

The presence of all-black towns led to complex racial relationships between blacks and whites in the state. Blacks had autonomy in towns that were all-black, but blacks lived in other towns as well and had to navigate a complicate landscape. However, some of the interactions between whites and blacks in the state show a degree of racial acceptance by white Oklahomans. For example, in Guthrie, Oklahoma there was a black settler, Lew Green, who ran the bar in the Royal Hotel, which at one point was the headquarters for state officials. Lew ran a profitable establishment and was well liked by state officials who

¹²⁴ Nancy C. Curtis, *Black Heritage Sites: An African American Odyssey and Finder's Guide* (Chicago: American Library Assn. Editions, 1996). The Rosenwald Fund was used to build several schools in the all-black towns in the state

¹²⁵ *Moore v. Porterfield*, 1925, Oklahoma, Case Number 16424, <http://law.justia.com/cases/oklahoma/supreme-court/1925/49724.html>

frequented his bar. While he ran his bar, Lew was involved in a few minor scrapes over the years but state officials always paid his fine for him. When the capital was moved, Lew closed his bar in the hotel and opened a shoe shop, but still sold booze on the side. On one afternoon two policemen, entered his establishment and started a fight with Green. The policemen almost beat Green to death and Green drew a weapon and shot both officers in self-defense. Sherriff Mahoney arrested Green and later described the scene he encountered:

I never saw such a horrible sight, before or since, as that was. The two policemen lay on the floor, quite dead, from gunshot wounds. The negro's head was almost beaten in, and the room looked like a slaughterhouse. One officer had broken his billy –club over Lew's head, and the other had beaten him with his six-shooter.¹²⁶

Sherriff Mahoney took Green to jail and called a doctor to dress his head. He remarked later that, “ My first duty seemed to be to get medical attention for the wounded man.”¹²⁷ Word spread like quickly throughout the town about Lew's crime and men armed with guns came for Green. Sherriff Mahoney did not want the mob to attach Green so he removed Green from the jail and raced him out of town to safety. The mob pursued both of them out of town but Sherriff succeeded in getting Green out. The next day, Mahoney saw one of the mob assailants Dr. Ralph Smith on the street and the doctor was embarrassed by his actions and apologized to Mahoney for the mob.¹²⁸ This encounter demonstrated the town's limits to racial progressivism. The town accepted Lew but when he killed the officers in self-defense they reacted with mob violence. However, Sherriff Mahoney's reaction to protect Green from mob violence shows there was some degree of racial

¹²⁶ John Mahoney Oral Interview, by Ruth E. Moon, Works Public Administration, Indian- Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma, October 20, 1937 in Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma.

¹²⁷ Ibid,7.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 12.

acceptance. Sherriff Mahoney recollected later in his life that his actions were driven by a desire to make sure the young man received appropriate justice, not mob retaliation.¹²⁹

Growing Up in Oklahoma

Oklahoma's all-black communities were extraordinary because they created an environment where black Oklahomans formed strong communities that flourished without the limitations of white discrimination.¹³⁰ The vibrancy of a strong black culture impacted the growth and the establishment of over fifty all-black towns that excluded white's participation in education, politics, and businesses created a distinctive environment for the next generation to grow up in. Children born into these all-black towns were immersed in these values and were expected to abide by them in their own lives. Canson experienced a unique upbringing because both of her parents were community leaders in several all-black towns in Oklahoma. She was surrounded by values of the black professional class that focused on building social, economic and political cultural advancement for the black community.¹³¹ They raised Canson and her siblings to abide by certain principles. She stated, "I grew up in a home where I would get a spanking if I didn't look at people."¹³² As a child she grew accustomed to hearing people tell her dad he could become the president

¹²⁹ Mahoney, 14. Green received a hearing but was sentenced to forty-years for defending himself against the two policemen.

¹³⁰ Jill Quadagno, "Social Movements and State Transformation: Labor Unions and Racial Conflict In the War on Poverty," *American Sociological Review* 57:5 (October 1991): 616-34, discusses the power bases that can be constructed that redistribute economic bases particularly when a group can become a majority, an idea furthered by Power Resource Theory.

¹³¹ W.E.B. Du Bois both pointed out the strength of the Black economy but also called for an emphasis on creating a stronger economic infrastructure in his work, *Economic Cooperation among Negro Americans* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1907).

¹³² Virna Canson, "Waging the War on Poverty and Discrimination in California through the NAACP, 1953-1974," Conducted by Sarah Sharp and Julie Shearer, Regional History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1987,5.

of the United States.¹³³ She later remarked as a child she and her brothers and sisters were, “constantly exposed to people who were contributing, and people who had a very high sense of values, and assumed the responsibility of leadership.”¹³⁴ Canson primarily grew up in Lima, Oklahoma and never envisioned she would become a leader of the NAACP. However, her roots reveal that she was uniquely prepared for the multiple leadership roles she held in the black freedom struggle in California. Canson grew up in a prominent middle- class family accustomed to seeing her parents, both educators, in leadership roles in the community.¹³⁵

During the height of the all-black movement, both of Canson’s parents moved to Oklahoma when they were young with their families. Canson’s father, William Augustus Dobson, was originally born in Arkansas and his father moved to Oklahoma so he could practice his ministry. He was the Congregationalist minister of a church in Anadarko, Oklahoma and traveled throughout portions of the state as a circuit-riding minister. He grew up with two half brothers and one full brother and his family had the means to send him to all-black private schools. His father raised him to become a community leader and when he graduated from high school he sent him to the all-black college of Langston University. Canson commented her own father “brought that influence there (Oklahoma), with his father being a strong person, and a minister.”¹³⁶ Canson’s father became a teacher, which was a well-regarded position in the community and most people referred to him as Dr. Dobson. Eula Gross Dobson, her mother, was also raised in a strong family environment by

¹³³ Virna Canson Responding Panel, “Proceedings of the Conference on Consumer and Homemaking Education,” November 9-10, Anaheim, California, 6, files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED087911.pdf, retrieved October 2013.

¹³⁴ Canson, “Waging the War on Poverty,” 1.

¹³⁵ Elizabeth Fernandez, “Virna Canson: Fighting Fire with Fire,” *The Crisis*, 90:10 (June/July 1983): 278.

¹³⁶ Canson, “Waging the War,” 6.

parents who were committed to racial uplift. Her mother was born in a small town in North Carolina and her father worked the land as a farmer. However, her father did not want to work for southern landowners any longer and they relocated Earlsboro, Oklahoma. She was the oldest of the three siblings and her father treated her as though she were his son. He exposed her to the inter-workings of the community and pushed her to take a leadership role.¹³⁷ Her father saw her potential and sent her to college where she majored in home economics. After she completed her degree, she became a teacher and was an active participant and leader in the community.

When William and Eula married they continued teaching in various towns throughout the state. As teachers, had leadership roles in each of the communities they lived in and were active in several organizations. On June 21st, 1920, after a few years of marriage Eula gave birth to her first child, Virna. At this point, they lived in Bridgeport, OK, which was smaller town located in Caddo County on the south bank of the Canadian River, was know for its rich farmland and access to the railroad. The town's residents were mostly black and the town developed at a slower pace. However, by 1904 the small town experienced growth and included seventy-six places of businesses and a successful flourmill.¹³⁸ Canson's parents were well respected in the community and held prominent positions in the town and served on several politically important organizations. Her mother was active in the federation of Colored Women's Clubs, Women's Oklahoma Association of Negro Teachers, and the National Unity of Colored Women. Her father became president of the Oklahoma Association of Colored Teachers, which placed Canson in a

¹³⁷ Canson, "Waging the War," 6.

¹³⁸ John Wesley Morris, *Ghost Towns of Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978), 34.

circle of educators as a child.¹³⁹ Her father's leadership extended outside of the academic circle and he served as mayor of Bridgeport for a short time.¹⁴⁰

Their leadership and social position within the town was documented on several occasions by *The Black Dispatch*. *The Black Dispatch* was a well-circulated black Oklahoma newspaper that covered global, national and local news. In each edition the paper included a section focusing on the social happenings of all-black towns throughout the state. Canson's parent's activities graced the pages and reveal how well regarded the Dobson's were within the community. For instance, when Canson turned one- years old the paper covered her birthday party and provided a detailed description of the occasion. The report included the details of the cake, which was a snow-white cake, and described how beautifully decorated the room was with pink roses. *The Black Dispatch* also revealed the guests were served a three-course luncheon of punch, chicken sandwiches, fruit salad, ice cream and cake.¹⁴¹ In other editions of the paper, her mother's trips to visit friends in other towns were described as well as social gatherings held in their household.

Aside from seeing her mother in leadership positions, Canson also observed several incidences where her mother confronted harassment and racism. In 1922, her father accepted a position in Sapulpa, a small town located outside of Tulsa and both of her parents worked at the "colored" school. When Canson was a small child she remembered an encounter between her mother and the O.E. Shaw the chairman of the Sapulpa school trustee board, a portly man who signed her mother's checks. Canson's mother was outside washing clothes outside on a warm Oklahoma spring day when Shaw's car approached her.

¹³⁹ Canson, "Waging the War," 6.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 7.

¹⁴¹ *The Black Dispatch*, June 15, 1922, 8.

He hung his head out of the window and Canson remembered it was clear he had a few too many drinks. Shaw attempted to flirt with her mother from the car and her mother ignored his advances. Undeterred by her silence, he started to get out of his vehicle; she quickly picked up a shovel and said, “If you come one step closer, I will try to kill you.”¹⁴² He quickly retreated and years later when Canson recounted this story later she chuckled and stated, “I witnessed that.”¹⁴³

Her mother also questioned discriminatory practices in Oklahoma communities unfriendly to blacks. On one occasion she traveled through Seminole, OK and became thirsty. She entered the local drugstore, approached the counter and requested a glass of water. The server complied with her request for water, but instead of giving her a glass, they handed her water in a paper cup. Incensed by the insult, she slammed the paper cup on the counter and stormed out of the drugstore.¹⁴⁴ The drugstore complied with her request for water but they discriminated against her by giving her paper cup. The act of serving of paper cups in drugstores signified they did not want the patron to stay nor did they deem them worthy of a glass cup. She was outraged by the drugstore’s treatment and she immediately went to the Seminole Chamber of Commerce and voiced her complaint. She told them, “You are constantly asking people to come to this city and trade, and this is the treatment they get.”¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Canson, “Waging the War,” 8.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ It should be noted the act of giving a paper cup signified a person was not welcomed to sit at the counter and glasses were reserved for the “white” customer. Several entertainers discussed this practice when they were traveling and how glasses were seen as “white” only. Paul Coombs details an account in his work, *Dameronia*, where Tadd Dameron was drinking out of a glass and another patron smashed the glass because it was contaminated by his blackness. *Dameronia: The Life and Music of Tadd Dameron* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2012), 44-45.

¹⁴⁵ Canson, “Waging the War,” 7.

Both of her parents encouraged their children to work hard in their studies and supported several organizations aimed at furthering education. As educators they saw the potential of the next generation and worked hard to ensure children succeeded. Canson remembered her father could always see the potential in children "... they were ragged and barefoot and came to school with a cold biscuit and a cold sausage...the teacher in my mind, is my father. He was a great man of empathy who looked above those outward appearances that might be termed 'unlovable'." ¹⁴⁶ They inspired children to strive for excellence in their studies and supported the Ninety Percent Social Club. ¹⁴⁷ Students in the Ninety Percent Social Club maintained an "A" average and had regular attendance in school. Those students in the club were treated to luncheons, games and music within the homes of teachers. ¹⁴⁸

Girded with these life principles, Canson was a studious student and took her education very seriously and graduated from Douglass High School in Wewoka, OK as the valedictorian in 1938. ¹⁴⁹ Her parents wanted her to continue her education in an environment that encouraged the ideals of racial uplift and community development. In the fall of 1938, Canson went to Tuskegee Institute. Tuskegee promoted the philosophy of its

¹⁴⁶ Virna Canson Responding Panel, "Proceedings of the Conference on Consumer and Homemaking Education," November 9-10, Anaheim, California, 6, files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED087911.pdf, retrieved October 2013.

¹⁴⁷ "Bridgeport News," *The Black Dispatch*, April 15, 1921, 12.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ The church and women's organizations such as the National Association for Colored Women served as significant sites where women learned how to confront discrimination and become community leaders. Some exemplars of works focusing on women's activism in the church and female led organizations are: Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Judith Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York's Black YWCA, 1905-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); and Francesca Morgan, *Women and Patriotism in Jim Crow America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

founder Booker T. Washington who remarked, “Education in the broadest and truest sense will make an individual seek to help all people, regardless of race, regardless of color, regardless of condition.”¹⁵⁰ Tuskegee continued her training in the ideologies of racial uplift and community self- help she was surrounded with as a child. Canson studied home economics, like her mother, and she was an honor roll student. While she attended Tuskegee, she also was given a job, which was a common practice at the school because Washington wanted students to be able to afford school and their work for the school offset their expenses. At first, Canson worked in laundry but she was moved into the library and worked for the Department of Records and Research. Her primary job for the library was going through newspapers and clipping out every account of lynching in the United States.¹⁵¹ Canson knew that racial conditions were bad throughout the country, but her work in the library exposed her to the harsh reality of how widespread violence was throughout the nation.

During her years at Tuskegee, there was a shift in the political activism that amongst the younger Tuskegee faculty and impacted Canson. Some of the younger faculty moved away from Washington’s conservative “accommodationist” approach. The younger faculty believed larger issues of discrepancies in education needed to be addressed more publicly. At the forefront of this movement was Charles Gomillion, who taught sociology, and he and several other faculty members formed the Tuskegee Men’s Club, which encouraged people to register to vote. One of the club’s very first major accomplishments was the founding of the Tuskegee Institute Federal Credit Union in 1938. The Tuskegee Men’s

¹⁵⁰ Emmett J. Scott, “Present Achievements and Governing Ideals,” in *Tuskegee & Its People: Their Ideals and Achievements*, Booker T. Washington, ed., (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1905; 1969), 28.

¹⁵¹ Virna Canson, “Waging the War,” 8.

Club wanted students to have their own economic power and believed the credit union gave them financial freedom. Historian Robert Norrell wrote about Tuskegee and quoted Gomillion, “Education alone will not change the Negro’s condition as long as there is prejudice, segregation and hatred...among his white neighbors.”¹⁵² Gomillion was a part of a newer generation of teachers at Tuskegee and his beliefs represented a more modern school of activism.

Canson remembered the impact these teachers had on her and others students. She recognized they needed to do more to change the conditions of blacks throughout the nation. Due to her job at the library, she saw the deterioration of racial conditions and she knew the community needed strong leaders to confront and silence the violence. Canson benefitted from her education and interaction with other students and teachers at Tuskegee. During her time at Tuskegee, she excelled in her studies and enjoyed both the academic and social environment offered by the institution. However, her academic training only lasted for two years. At the end of her sophomore year she realized that she would not return to Tuskegee and set out on a new adventure; however, she did not realize this new journey would be the beginning of her fight for black equality.

¹⁵² Robert J. Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Press, 1985), 35-43. In an oral interview Virna gave in 1984, she mentioned Gomillion and the famous case *Gomillion v. Lightfoot* and suggested this had a major influence on her.

Chapter 3

“Searching for Freedom in the Promised Land”

The West has long been storied as the land of freedom. Here men have come for many generations seeking equality and opportunity for themselves and their children: men from the east, the south, the north; men from the four corners of the world; men of diverse races...all dreaming the same dream that here they could, and would, realize the egalitarian promise of the Declaration of Independence.¹⁵³

-Tarea Hall Pittman

In May of 1940, Canson had a difficult decision on whether or not she would return to Tuskegee. Her parents struggled financially and her brother just graduated from school. She remembered it was a tough year for many teachers and many teachers were forced to borrow money in order to stay afloat. Further complicating matters, Canson had fallen in love with an upperclassman, Clarence Canson. In the spring of 1940, Clarence completed his degree in tailoring at Tuskegee and planned on returning to his hometown- Sacramento, California. Clarence wanted Virna to go with him and asked for her hand in marriage, she later commented she told her daughter, “Never fall in love with an upperclassman, because it puts your own college career at risk.”¹⁵⁴ They married in a small ceremony in Lima, OK on August 7, 1940. Even though the ceremony was small, the entire black community attended their wedding and there was a large celebration after the service. After their wedding, Canson and her husband did not stay long in Oklahoma and they went to

¹⁵³ Status of Civil Rights in the Far West: Supplemental to Statement issued by Emergency Meeting of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Regional Leadership, January 11, 1954. Tarea Hall Pittman Collection, 2203:Folder 11.

¹⁵⁴ Canson, “Waging the War,” 4.

Sacramento to be close to Clarence's family. Sacramento appealed to both of them because opportunities were more plentiful in California. They also thought Clarence's family connections in the community would make it easier to find employment. Canson had never visited California but she pictured a sunny, lush environment with a strong, vibrant black community.¹⁵⁵

This chapter examines the development of the black Sacramentan community prior to the 1940s in order to show the complexities of the racial environment confronting Canson and other blacks. During the 1940s, thousands of blacks moved into Sacramento and created the seeds for the development of a stronger black community. Strengthened by New Deal liberalism and the belief in the Double V campaign, new migrants expected a racially progressive environment. However, lurking underneath the veneer of racial acceptance was a complicated pattern of discriminatory practices. Black newcomers were surprised by the extent of both overt and covert racism they faced. They were even more shocked by the lack of activism in Sacramento but they were unaware of the previous struggles and triumphs of the black community. This chapter reveals the activism before the war because it is vital to connect the activities of the older generation with the younger generation to show how the black freedom struggle changed and evolved over time. This chapter also considers why newcomers thought Sacramento lacked a strong activist community and how the influx of blacks led to the emergence of a strong grassroots civil rights movement. The civil rights leaders in Sacramento had an incredible amount of influence than other second tier cities because they lived in the state's capitol and had direct access to the political workings of the state. These leaders

¹⁵⁵ Canson, "Waging the War,"12.

clung to California's progressive narrative of racial liberalism and pushed to create their own California Dream. Due to the influx of blacks and other minorities during the war, civil rights organizations flourished and created an environment ripe for the passage of civil rights legislation.

During the 1940s, the black population of California grew from 462,000 to nearly a million by the beginning of the 1950s. This growth was astounding given the 1940 census only recorded one hundred and twenty four blacks in Sacramento.¹⁵⁶ When Canson moved into Sacramento the city had over one hundred thousand residents. Given her previous life experiences living in all-black towns in Oklahoma and attending a black college, she assumed Sacramento would have a vibrant black community. Upon her arrival, she immediately recognized the racial environment in Sacramento was different and she did not see any visible black community or black leadership; there were no black teachers, mayors, or policemen.¹⁵⁷ Within her first few weeks of living in Sacramento, she was invited to the black community's main social gathering, a picnic. She was thrilled to meet others within the community, but her excitement quickly turned to disappointment when she discovered the picnic was the garbage men's picnic. Her husband informed her the best job available for the most educated black men in Sacramento was as a garbage man. Canson was shocked the highest level of employment available to black men, regardless of their education, was as a garbage collector. Canson did not want her children to grow up in such an environment and she believed the black community could do more to push for change.¹⁵⁸

During the Second World War, when blacks entered the capitol they came from

¹⁵⁶ Census Bureau, 1940, Historical Statistics of the United States.

¹⁵⁷ Canson, "Waging the War," 14.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

places with bigger, more established black populations. In addition, they were from states located outside of the Deep South such as Oklahoma, Texas, Louisiana, and Kansas. Like Canson, they arrived to the capitol armed with a different set of life experiences that shaped their expectations of the Golden State. The states they came from had robust black populations and they were used to seeing black businesses, leadership and organizations at the heart of their community. Despite their disappointment in the racial environs in the capitol, Canson and other newcomers were unaware of the longer history of the black community development and activism in Sacramento.

The Early Black Sacramentan Community:

By the 1940s, Sacramento's black community experienced decades of community growth and advancement. However, the black population was smaller than what newcomers envisioned and fell short of their expectations. The capitol developed at a glacial pace in comparison to the larger urban centers of Los Angeles and San Francisco; however, it was the largest city in the San Joaquin Valley. Sacramento attracted few American settlers until the discovery of gold in the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers in 1849. During the Gold Rush, people called forty-niners, were lured in by reports of miners finding gold the size of hen's eggs.¹⁵⁹ Miners invaded the region with hopes of quickly getting rich, which created a jackpot mentality. This mentality dominated American's perceptions of the region and further fueled the proliferation of the California Dream.¹⁶⁰ Waves of gold seekers were

¹⁵⁹ This invasion of Americans signaled the end of the Spanish and Mexican eras.

¹⁶⁰ J.S. Holiday writes about the jackpot mentality in his work, *Rushes for Riches, Gold Fever and the Making of California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 147.

willing to risk everything along the way, because they believed the Golden State was a chance for new beginnings and prosperity.¹⁶¹

Similar to other Americans, black pioneers went to Sacramento because of the promises of cheap land, opportunity, and gold. They also moved to California in search of social, economic, and political freedom in their new home state. The demographics of the region prior to statehood differed from many other territories and states because of the presence of Chinese, Mexicans, Spanish, and Native peoples.¹⁶² Given these demographics, blacks thought California would be a place of sanctuary from white rule and domination. Their hopes were bolstered by newspaper accounts, which celebrated California as a place of refuge for blacks.¹⁶³ The Gold Rush attracted freed blacks seeking their own fortunes, but it also brought in southern slave owners who brought their slaves to the gold fields. Southerners relocated to California in an effort to keep their slaves and reap the rewards of the Gold Rush.

The Gold Rush did not bring wealth to most of the miners and settlers looked for other ways to make ends meet. Many of the initial black pioneers in Sacramento found jobs as stewards, cooks, porter, and barbers and in other skilled positions.¹⁶⁴ By 1852, the

¹⁶¹ Several notable works illustrate the importance of the Gold Rush to the development of California as an American state are: J. S. Holliday *The World Rushed in The California Gold Rush Experience* (New York: First Touchstone Edition, 1983); H.W. Brands *The Age of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the New American Dream* (New York: Doubleday, 2003); and Susan Johnson, *The Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000).

¹⁶² Quintard Taylor, *In Search of a the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the West, 1528-1990* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998) discusses these factors at some length and explains this is what attracted African Americans into the West and, particularly, into California.

¹⁶³ Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California*, 19.

¹⁶⁴ Ms. Returns, Population Schedules, Seventh. Census, El Dorado, Sacramento and Tuolumne Counties; Eighth Census, El Dorado, Sacramento, Tuolumne and San Francisco Counties. (Microfilm, Bancroft Library).

black population of Sacramento had grown to 338 blacks.¹⁶⁵ Even though the black population was small, they sought to re-create organizations they were familiar with from their home states. One key institution they established was the church, which became an important social and political center for black Sacramentans. Church leaders, pastors and ministers, along with parishioners worked together to fight against a growing trend in California to strip away the rights from blacks.¹⁶⁶ St. Andrews African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church became one of the most important churches in the community and functioned both as a place of worship and a meeting site for community functions.

In 1855 and 1866, St. Andrews hosted two important statewide Colored Conventions and included delegates from all over the state.¹⁶⁷ Due to mounting concerns over the passage of laws aimed at limiting black freedom, leaders from several cities and towns in California called for the conventions. Under the Compromise of 1850, California entered the union as a free state and blacks expected an environment free from slavery and racially discriminatory laws. However, southerners also moved into the state and they wanted to replicate the laws of the South. Southern Democrats dominated the state's

¹⁶⁵ Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 24.

¹⁶⁶ The church was an important institution in many communities and served as a place of worship and a center of political activism within the black community. Scholars who have explored the connection between the church and political activism in the black community are: E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America: The Black Church Since Frazier* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974); C Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990); James H. Cone, *Black Theology and the Black Power* (New York: Orbis, 1997).

¹⁶⁷ The Colored Convention Movement started in the 1830s in the eastern states and continued for several decades. The conventions focused on schools for black children, the right to vote, equal rights in courts, and ending violence against blacks. It should be noted St. Andrews was initially called Bethel Baptist. For more on the Colored Convention Movement please see: Howard H. Bell, *A Survey of the Negro Convention Movement, 1830-1861* (New York: Arno Press, 1969); Philip S. Foner and George Elizer Walker, *Proceedings of the Black State Conventions: 1840-1865* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979); and John A. Ernest, *A Nation Within a Nation; Organizing African American Communities before the Civil War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Inc., 2011).

legislature and by 1852, Assemblyman Henry A. Crabb, introduced a Fugitive Slave Law. This slave law made it illegal for slaves to run away from their masters and allowed masters to claim their slaves. The law also allowed masters with slaves in California prior to statehood to keep them or take them back to slave states.¹⁶⁸ In addition, fugitive slaves prohibited fugitive slaves from testifying or calling witnesses on their behalf in the courts. The laws left blacks with little judicial recourse because blacks were unable to testify against whites in the courts.¹⁶⁹

Black Californians were alarmed and saw the passage of the fugitive slave laws as a dangerous precedence that could lead to other laws aimed at stripping away black rights. Black Californians had fled the South to escape racially restrictive laws and they did not want to see southern legislation take root in California law. Black delegates met together to find solutions and ways to combat the legislature's attempts to make them second-class citizens.¹⁷⁰ Convention delegates met to address the political and socioeconomic dilemmas they faced.¹⁷¹ At the convention, delegates were divided out into individual committees and tasked with examining business, education, and political rights. The convention also established a committee of people who lived in San Francisco, Sacramento, and Marysville

¹⁶⁸ Many individuals still think California was a "free state" because of the Compromise of 1850, which banned slavery in California. However, slaves were brought into the state during the gold rush and their southern masters became powerful leaders and influenced the passage of laws that allowed them to keep their slaves. An excellent work on the topic of unfree labor in California is Stacey L. Smith, *Freedom's Frontier, California and the Struggle over Unfree Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

¹⁶⁹ Stacey L. Smith, *Freedom's Frontier*, 72.

¹⁷⁰ It should be noted there were several African Americans who found ways to navigate California's racial landscape and were quite successful in their ventures. Perhaps the most well known of these individuals is William Leidesdorff who became the nation's first African American Diplomat and served on San Francisco's city council. For more on Leidesdorff see Gary Mitchell Palgon, *William Alexander Leidesdorff: First Black Millionaire, American Consul and California Pioneer* (Atlanta: Lulu Press, 2005).

¹⁷¹ Clarence Caesar, "The Historical Demographics of Sacramento's Black Community, 1848-1900," *California History*, 75, no.3 (Fall, 1996): 198.

to serve as a medium of communication between the Colored Convention and the state legislature.¹⁷² These two conventions also signaled the political maturity of the black community and also showed the presence of strong black leadership, which was unafraid of taking on the state legislature.¹⁷³

One of the main agendas of the Colored Convention was to find ways to establish schools throughout the state. Energized by the momentum of the convention, several black Sacramentan leaders went before the school board and petitioned for funding to start their own school.¹⁷⁴ The school board gave them meager funds and stipulated the black community was responsible for providing the building, furnishings, materials, books, slates and desks. Undeterred by the school board's lack of support, they successfully gathered enough resources and materials to build a school. However, within the first year of operation the school suffered considerable damage in the 1861 flood. Yet, the community came together and pooled enough resources to repair the flood damage and reopened the school the following year. In spite of this, others in the community were not happy with the presence of the school and in 1863 arsonists burned down the school.¹⁷⁵

Other black communities pushed the educational issue further and used the 1866 Civil Rights Bill and the Fourteenth Amendment as their legal backing. In 1872, the parents of Mary Frances Ward challenged the legality of separate schools in San

¹⁷² "Proceedings of the Colored Convention," *Sacramento Daily Union*, November 22, 1855, 3.

¹⁷³ Rudolph M. Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California* (Binghamton, NY: Vail-Ballou Press, 1977), 167.

¹⁷⁴ David Covin, *Black Politics: After the Civil Rights Movement: Activity and Beliefs in Sacramento, 1970-2000* (Jefferson: North Carolina, McFarland & Company Inc., 2009), 17.

¹⁷⁵ Marilyn, K. Demas, "Ungraded School No. 2 Colored: The African American Struggle for Education in Victorian Sacramento," *Sacramento County Historical Society*, 45: 2 *Golden Notes*, 31-35.

Francisco.¹⁷⁶ They wanted their daughter to attend the school closest to their residence, The Broadway Grammar School, but she was denied admittance by the principal, Noah F. Flood who informed them to enroll her at the separate colored school.¹⁷⁷ The *Ward* case went all the way to the State Supreme Court and at the level the justices struggled to reach a decision on the case. While the court justices remained in limbo about their decision, several school boards found themselves embroiled in disputes on whether or not to allow for the admittance of black children to all white schools.

In 1873, the Sacramento City Board, which was comprised primarily of Republicans, opened up discussions on admitting black children to all-white schools. The board received appeals from two different families who requested admission to an all-white school. The parents of two girls asked for admission to the all-white school because the school was geographically closer to their place of residence. The board's mere consideration to allow black children into the white school alarmed parents. Outraged by the board's discussion, parents showed their displeasure when they went to the polls and voted all the Republicans off of the board in the next election. They replaced Republican board members with Democrats because they wanted segregation maintained in the schools. In 1874, the court arrived at a decision on *Ward v. Flood* case and declared segregated schools were legal as long as "separate was equal."¹⁷⁸ Twenty-two years before the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, the court established the legal precedent allowing for the segregation

¹⁷⁶ Covin, *Black Politics After the Civil Rights Movement*, 33.

¹⁷⁷ *Ward v. Flood* (1874) 48 Cal. 36.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

of schools. However, the ruling also stipulated if a separate school did not exist, “colored children” could enter white schools.¹⁷⁹

Even though the state ruling allowed for the continued practice of separate schools, there were many towns that did not have enough economic resources to support two separate schools. Black parents were not willing to let their children’s education suffer and pushed for proper schooling. Despite the fact the *Ward* decision allowed for segregation, parents used the *Ward* ruling as legal backing for funding for their schools. When school boards were reluctant to provide adequate capital, they pressured the boards to permit their children to attend the white school. In 1890, the first court case addressing segregation in California schools was *Wysinger v. Crookshank*.¹⁸⁰ Mr. Edmund Wysinger had six boys and two girls and was determined they attend school. When his oldest son Arthur was ready to go into high school in Visalia they refused to admit him.¹⁸¹ The court ruling followed the precedence established by *Ward* and ruled black youth could attend the regular public schools:

It must appear clear, therefore, that the power to establish separate public schools for children of African descent, and to exclude them from the public schools established for white children, has been taken away from boards of school trustees and boards of education, and that the power claimed by the teacher and the board of education of the city of Visalia does not exist.¹⁸²

The black Sacramentan community used both the *Ward* and *Wysinger* cases for leverage and pressured the board for access to white schools. The school board could not afford funding two schools and in 1894 the school board abolished segregation in education. The school board took an additional step and appointed Sarah Jones, a teacher at

¹⁷⁹ Demas, “Ungraded School No. 2 Colored,” 34.

¹⁸⁰ Deliah Beasley, *The Negro Trail Blazers of California* (New York: Negro University Press, 1919), 182-183.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid*, 183.

¹⁸² *Wysinger v Crookshank* (1890) 82 Cal 588, 720, January 29, 1890.

Sacramento's Ungraded School 2, as the principal.¹⁸³ She became the first black woman in Sacramento to be a principal of a desegregated elementary school when she received her appointment at Fremont Primary School. Sacramentans had mixed reactions to Jones' appointment and while some parents supported the school board other parents did not want her to teach their children. A group of thirty-nine parents petitioned the school board and demanded she be placed in another school. However, the black Sacramentan community rallied behind Miss Jones and presented their own petition to the school board and requested the board to follow through with their appointment of Ms. Jones. They presented a petition of ninety- eight supporters that included both black and white parents.¹⁸⁴ The petitioners succeeded in swaying the school board and they honored their appointment of Ms. Jones. However, her placement in the school did not signify a larger policy change within the school board to hire more black teachers. In fact the school board did not hire another black teacher until 1948.

By the early 1900s, the black Sacramentan community grew and there were more visible leaders. In 1918, several community and church leaders united together and formed a branch of the NAACP. The first Sacramento branch of the NAACP had seventy- three members and became the leading civil right's organization in the capitol. Chapter meetings were held at St. Andrews and the chapter's main focus was on expanding educational and political rights. One of their first victories came when the NAACP capitalized on a garbage men's strike. Up until the 1920s, the garbage men for the City of Sacramento were always of Italian descent. Garbage collectors used horse drawn wagons and their work was

¹⁸³ Marilyn K. Demas, "Ungraded School No. 2 Colored: The African American Struggle for Education in Victorian Sacramento," Sacramento County Historical Society, Vol. 45, 1 and 2 *Golden Notes*.

¹⁸⁴ "One of Sacramento's Early 'Colored' Classes: The Seeds were Planted," *Sacramento Observer*, (1997) <http://www.highbeam.com>, (March 2, 2010).

extremely difficult and the workers had few sanitary protections. The Italians wanted more protections and better wages so they went on strike. The city began to smell and the leaders of the NAACP decided to capitalize on the strike and demanded the city hire black men. The city agreed to hire blacks because rather than raise the wages of the current workers they could hire blacks at even lower wages.¹⁸⁵ The city hired blacks but they placed two men on each truck, one was black and the other was white. The white worker received more wages because he driving while the black worker was responsible for placing the waste on the truck. The NAACP approached the city about this practice and recommended the city use a rotational system, where one worker switched between driving and collecting.¹⁸⁶ The city's hiring of black men as garbage workers gave some black men regular, steady employment, wages and benefits. These garbage workers became a privileged group in the black Sacramento community and they became leaders in the black community.¹⁸⁷

Several all-black clubs and fraternal organizations were also founded and allowed for the development of separate spheres where blacks could freely operate without discrimination. These clubs and fraternal organizations offered social outlets for members and provided vital community services, which benefitted the entire black community. In 1936, Viola Brooks and Netta Sparks founded The Negro Women's Civic Improvement Club because members recognized a lack of housing for single black women.¹⁸⁸ After World War I, Viola women noticed the only real housing for single minority women was in the city's "red light district." The "red light district" in Sacramento had the most crime and

¹⁸⁵ "Mrs. Nona Henry: Five Generations in the City of the Plains," *Sacramento Observer*, November 14, 1973, LL-16.

¹⁸⁶ Mrs. Netta Sparks, who was a leader in the NAACP and the Women's Civic Improvement Club gave an account of the garbage men's strike in her interview with the black paper the *Sacramento Observer*, "Mrs. Netta Sparks: Everything Better in Sacramento," November 14, 1973, LL-36.

¹⁸⁷ "One of Sacramento's Early 'Colored' Classes," 17.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 21.

people assumed women within this district were employed in positions of ill repute. Black middle class women were concerned for women living in this area and they did not want single women to live in risky housing environments. In order to address this situation, Viola and several other women worked together to locate better housing options.¹⁸⁹ They established a women's home where single women could live and also provided training so they could find better employment opportunities.

These early organizations and the Sacramento branch of the NAACP were critical in sustaining the black community. At the same time these groups formed, other groups emerged in the capitol with agendas aimed at oppressing minorities. In the 1900s, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) experienced a national revival. The passage of the 18th Amendment coupled with lax federal and state policies regarding minorities opened the door for the revitalization of the KKK and other white-society organizations. In the 1920s, the Klan organized in the Golden State's capitol and by 1921 they had nearly four hundred members. The Sacramento chapter of the KKK focused their attention on curbing violators of Prohibition and intimidating foreign immigrants. The KKK believed the Sacramento Police Department did a poor job addressing bootleggers and they initiated their own raids against bootleggers. The nightriders conducted their raids in the evening and then handed over the bootleggers and the liquor to the police department the following morning when the station opened. According to Edward Fuller, the primary goal of the Sacramento KKK was to "Sacramento too hot for bootleggers."¹⁹⁰ The Sacramento KKK went out of their way to demonstrate they were accepting of blacks. For example, in order to demonstrate their

¹⁸⁹ "60th at the WCIC: Women's Civic Improvement Club Celebrates Sixty Year," *Sacramento Observer*, November 27, 1996.

¹⁹⁰ "Ku Klux Klan Starts Sacramento Clean-Up," *Sacramento Bee*, October 16, 1922, 1.

tolerance of blacks, the Klan gathered together and helped paint one of the local black churches.¹⁹¹

The city's peculiar racial landscape was revealed when the Klan's numbers increased in the community. Several community leaders and members of city council were uneasy with the continued presence of the KKK. They were leery of Klan's lack of respect for authority and did not condone their extralegal approaches. The local paper, *The Sacramento Bee* and other leaders wanted the Klan out of Sacramento. In 1922, the KKK held a secret initiation ceremony in Oak Park. The paper found out about the ceremony and sent reporters disguised as initiates to participate and find out the identity of members. These reporters uncovered the identity of the participants by taking pictures of the car's license plate numbers and tracked down plates to the owners. They made of list of the participants and published their names in the paper.¹⁹² They discovered officers from the police department and other prominent community leaders were attendees and they petitioned for their removal from office. In addition, the city council met and unanimously passed a nightrider ordinance aimed at the Ku Klux Klan. Nightrider ordinances prohibited a person from wearing anything on their head that concealed their identity.¹⁹³ On the surface, the city council's reaction to the KKK was somewhat surprising given their acceptance of other discriminatory practices. Yet, the outward violent attacks by nightriders crossed the line for whites that wanted to protect the image of Sacramento being a safe city. In addition, the KKK's focus on taking out bootleggers crossed economic lines for certain

¹⁹¹ Stephen Avella, *Sacramento Indomitable City* (San Francisco: Arcadia Publishing, 2003), 87.

¹⁹² Avella, *Sacramento Indomitable City*, 87.

¹⁹³ "Sacramento Aims Blow at Night Riders," *Santa Ana Register*, May 2, 1922, 4.

politicians that also had their hand in ensuring illegal activities occurred without police intervention.

Throughout the twenties, the black Sacramentan community continued to develop but similar to the rest of the nation suffered an economic setback in the 1930s. The hardships produced by the Great Depression caused many black Sacramentans to look at other geographical areas for employment. Individuals from the middle and upper classes left Sacramento and went to Southern California for better economic opportunities. This movement led to a loss in the black “elite” and produced a vacuum in leadership positions. The Sacramento branch of the NAACP felt the repercussions of the Great Depression as well when their membership levels fell below required national levels. People had a hard enough time making ends meet, let alone paying their membership duties. In 1933, several leaders attempted to reapply for their NAACP charter, but it was slow going for several years. The process of rebuilding required a stronger black economic base and Canson’s father -in-law, Frank, spearheaded this effort. Blacks experienced limited economic opportunities and greater competition from other nonwhite groups for unskilled jobs during the depression. There were few blacks remaining in northern California; however, those who were there before the Second World War worked diligently to create an environment where they could live, work, and raise their families.

Many blacks living in the capitol before World War II believed Sacramento had a good racial environment and a strong black community. Canson’s husband’s family moved to Sacramento prior to the war and Clarence fondly recollected those early years. Clarence remembered everyone knew each other within the black community. Even though the community was extremely small, the community extended outside of the city’s boundaries

and included smaller towns in the valley. When Clarence was a young boy he sold and delivered *The Pittsburgh Courier* to the entire black Sacramentan community, which included West Sacramento, Bryte and Del Paso Heights.¹⁹⁴ He received one hundred fifty papers and after delivering all of the papers by bicycle, he had papers left over. Black communities in surrounding rural towns such as Bryte, (West Sacramento), Marysville, Guinda, Chico, Yuba, and Vallejo were all interconnected with the capitol and produced the sense of a larger black community.

Faced with rigid racially exclusionary policies, blacks utilized their own resources and found ways to both circumvent oppressive policies and create a cohesive black community. In the absence of a larger black community center in Sacramento, black youth produced their own spaces to socialize. These spaces extended beyond the boundaries of the city and included surrounding towns. They threw large picnics, visited one another's churches, and drove from town to town in caravans meeting with one another. During the summer months, there were social gatherings almost every weekend. When someone had a party formal invitations were not necessary because people would send out "the word," which was a verbal grapevine where people passed along information about the party. There was also a larger understanding that these informal invitations were open to the entire community. Black Sacramentans fondly recalled how "the word" was sent out from Sacramento for a party and kids from Oroville, Berkeley, Marysville and Vallejo would

¹⁹⁴ *The Pittsburgh Courier* was a black newspaper that carried news from all across the nation to the blacks in the entire metropolitan area.

turn up at social gatherings. These functions became a place where people from all over the valley socialized and shared their experiences.¹⁹⁵

During the summer months, “Around the World” parties were extremely popular with young people. “Around the World” parties were when young people loaded up their cars with food and traveled from the city into other areas. As they traveled from town to town other people would join them and the party grew bigger and bigger.¹⁹⁶ The interconnectedness of the Sacramento to the outlying areas was also evidenced in the romantic relationships youngsters had with one another. It was common for families from Sacramento and the outlying areas to marry each other and this extended their connections between the “big city” and the country. In addition, social groups and classes amongst blacks in Sacramento did not limit interactions between each other.¹⁹⁷

Despite the existence of a strong- cohesive black community Sacramento’s racial environment was less than desirable. The city did not have racially discriminatory laws on the books, but a deeper examination reveals a complicated racial climate where blacks were required to navigate a white cultural landscape. California did not have the Jim Crow laws of the South, but the Golden State masked their racist behaviors in practices that mimicked Jim Crow laws. It was harder for blacks to navigate this racial landscape because it was full of contradictions. These tendencies revealed themselves more in daily interactions and were much more difficult to discover. For instance, there were no laws about segregation in places of public accommodation such as restaurants. However, restaurants located in the

¹⁹⁵ The interconnectedness of the community before WWII was discussed by several interviewees including Clarence Canson, Grace Jenkins Brown, Phillips Jenkins, and Grace Benbow Johnson Love in the Sacramento Ethnic Communities Survey- Black Oral Histories.

¹⁹⁶ Clarence Canson, Oral Interview, Sacramento Ethnic Community, Conducted by Ceasar, 1983 and 1984/46.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, 12.

downtown area near the state capitol were known to cater to whites only. These unofficial segregation policies in capitol restaurants applied beyond blacks and included other minorities such as the Chinese and Japanese. Restaurant owners implemented these unofficial segregation policies because they did not want to alienate their white clientele. Given the location of their businesses next to the capitol, most of their customer base was white. Clarence Canson remarked, “It was nothing to see a sign in a restaurant or a business establishment, ‘No Colored Trade Solicited’.”¹⁹⁸ These types of segregation policies were also found in hotels in Sacramento. Mrs. Gladys Canson later commented, that “Rather than risk being turned away, most people entertained in their homes.”¹⁹⁹ When national black stars came to Sacramento, such as Marion Anderson and Duke Ellington, they were forced to find private homes to stay in.²⁰⁰

White business owners enforced these types of segregation policies in restaurants and hotels, but in some cases even black owned businesses adhered to these policies. Blacks owning businesses located near the capitol were more likely to follow racial restrictions. Taylor Walker owned a lucrative barbershop on California Street, which was located right next to the capitol. Walker was a savvy businessman and understood the majority of his clientele came from those who worked in the government. He hired six white barbers to work for him. However, Walker also worked within the shop, not as a barber but as a shoeshine. His business was extremely profitable and some of the most prestigious California politicians had their hair cut and shoes shined in his shop. Other blacks in the

¹⁹⁸ Clarence Canson, Oral History, 3.

¹⁹⁹ “Mrs. Gladys Canson: A Family Tradition of Service,” *Sacramento Observer*, November 14, 1973, LL-13.

²⁰⁰ Clarence Canson, Oral History, 4.

community remembered that he boasted about shining the shoes of the governors of California and yet he owned the place.²⁰¹

Given the segregation policies of restaurants and hotels, it would seem these unofficial rules would extend to education as well. However, children in Sacramento attended integrated schools. Due to the small population of blacks and other minorities, children of all races attended schools together. Black residents of Sacramento had different experiences within the school systems. A native Sacramentan, Elizabeth Benbow Johnson Lowe remembered her childhood was pleasant and did not feel the impact of discrimination. Her father was a one of the largest landowners in Del Paso Heights and a prominent leader as a reverend in the black community.²⁰² She did not remember experiencing much discrimination or racism and remembered playing with children of all races including Mexicans, Indians, whites and blacks. Her teachers treated her well but she did remember when items were missing it was not uncommon for teachers to questions black children first.²⁰³ However, other residents recalled how their interactions with white classmates had limitations. Phillip Jenkins, a descendant of a black pioneer family, was a star athlete in basketball and track and had positive interactions with his classmates when he participated in sports. Yet, when there were social functions such as parties and dances blacks he remembered he did not receive an invitation, particularly if the activity was held

²⁰¹ Clarence Canson, Oral Interview, 16.

²⁰² Elizabeth Benbow Johnson Love, Oral Interview, Conducted by Clarence Caesar, Sacramento Ethnic Communities Survey, Center for Sacramento History, 1983/146, December 10, 1983, 5.

²⁰³ Ibid.

in a white person's home.²⁰⁴ While some residents fondly remembered their childhoods their school experiences also reveal the limits of white acceptance of blacks.

There were other attempts outside of school to keep the young people of different races separated. The swimming pool, called Land Park Plunge was a popular summer hangout for kids and offered Sacramentans an escape from the oppressive humidity and heat of the summer.²⁰⁵ The pool owners and managers boasted that the pool was cleaned daily with fresh artesian well water. The privately run pool had a strict whites-only policy and refused entrance to any person of color.²⁰⁶ One Southside Park resident Al Bashor commented, "If you had a suntan, you couldn't get in."²⁰⁷ Parents came up with creative explanations to insulate their children from the discriminatory practices at the pool. They were used to the being systematically denied access to swimming pools and found ways to shield their children from the shadow of discrimination. Elizabeth remembered her mother prohibited her children from swimming in public pools and told them the water in public pools was unsafe because of the dangers of polio.²⁰⁸ The fear of polio spreading through public swimming pools was fairly common and when polio outbreaks occurred public pools were closed.²⁰³ Parents used the fear of polio to protect their children from discrimination and also protected them against infection. Young people found other outlets for swimming outside of the pools. The Sacramento River had deep swimming holes that provided relief from the heat and Whites did not frequent these swimming holes.

²⁰⁴ Philip Jenkins and Grace Jenkins Brown, Oral Interview, Conducted by Clarence Caesar, Sacramento Ethnic Communities Survey, Center for Sacramento History, 1983/146, November 3, 1983, 8.

²⁰⁵ It should be noted that the pool was initially called.

²⁰⁶ Jocelyn Munro Isido, *Sacramento's Land Park*, (San Francisco: Arcadia Publishing, 2005), 34.

²⁰⁷ Quoted in William Burg, "The Riverside Baths and Bare Ass Beach," *Midtown Monthly*, August 22, 2008. <http://www.midtownmonthly.net/life/the-riverside-baths-and-bare-ass-beach/>

²⁰⁸ Elizabeth Benbow Johnson Love, Oral Interview, 12.

The black community also realized that there were other racial lines within the white Sacramentan community that needed to navigate in order to maintain their position. Frank Canson, Canson's father-in-law, owned and operated a cleaning establishment where he cleaned, pressed and tailored clothing. His business had a large following of local patrons including blacks, Japanese, Chinese, and Filipinos.²⁰⁹ At one point he brokered a lucrative arrangement between the police department and cleaned and maintained all of their uniforms. For several years he had a good relationship with the police department and his business did well. This dynamic changed when Frank challenged the local sheriff. Frank took a local prizefighter to small claims court over money the fighter owed him and won his case. Despite the court's ruling, the fighter refused to pay what was owed. He requested a writ of execution from the courts and the sheriff retrieved Frank's money from the fighter. The sheriff brought Frank his money, but he realized the sheriff had shortchanged him. Instead of allowing the sheriff to pocket the money, he questioned the sheriff about the missing money. The two got into an argument and Frank told the sheriff, "Well I supposed you needed this money more than I did."²¹⁰ Due to his exchange with the sheriff, the police department severed their arrangement with him and they took their uniforms elsewhere.

There were few blacks in the community and even fewer blacks in positions of power and leaders in the community. Robert Canson, Virna's brother-in-law, remembered when he moved into the state with his family in 1930 there were few businesses or activities controlled by blacks.²¹¹ When he attended school there were no black teachers and white

²⁰⁹ Clarence Bernard Canson, oral history interview by Clarence Caesar, January 18, 1984, Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento Ethnic Communities Survey, Black Oral Histories, 1983/146, 9.

²¹⁰ Clarence Bernard Canson, Oral History, 9.

²¹¹ Robert Canson, oral history interview by Clarence Caesar, February 3, 1984, Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento Ethnic Communities Survey, Black Oral Histories, 1983/146, 2.

students were not accepting of black students. The absence of black school teachers within the schools and few employment opportunities for blacks in Sacramento led to counselors tracking black students into taking courses that limited them to manual labor after high school. High school counselors did not encourage black students to pursue college. Many people realized that even with college degrees the highest levels of employment for blacks were jobs that did not require college educations.²¹² Canson's husband Clarence remarked, "I figured that you didn't need all of that education to pack garbage."²¹³ His dad pushed him to do more with his life and Clarence remembered his father telling him to get out of Sacramento. His father sent him out of Sacramento and as Clarence recollected, "So he put me on a train and sent me down to Tuskegee. Well I played around there for while before I finally got down to studying. Because I saw boys down there who were aspiring to something."²¹⁴

Despite the wide range of jobs available in Sacramento, economic opportunities were restricted because discriminatory policies were firmly entrenched in employment practices. State and city jobs were the most sought after because they paid well and appeared to be open to all applicants regardless of their race. In addition, when employment doors appeared opened, employers limited upward mobility and pay by placing blacks in the lowest sector of governmental jobs. Blacks applied for state jobs, and found irrespective of the amount of education or training they possessed they were never hired in the higher paying, better jobs. Young black men who had degrees from a University of California school and were highly qualified for local and state government jobs easily passed the

²¹² Several interviews conducted through the Sacramento Ethnic Communities Survey recollected there were no black teachers nor did counselors suggest college for black students.

²¹³ Clarence Bernard Canson, Oral Interview, 14.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

qualification exams required for other areas of city work, but the city refused to hire them in more lucrative areas. In one instance the state opened up positions for black applicants with college degrees. However, black employees were only offered positions as janitors. The same process occurred in the Sanitation Department where young black men with college degrees from the University of California were hired as garbage collectors and never in higher paying administration jobs.²¹⁵

In the 1940s the NAACP pushed the California State Civil Service system to hire a black woman but her hiring did not open doorways for other black applicants. Iverna Anderson took the Civil Service exam and passed with the highest score, but she was only given part time employment. One the first day of her new job, she noticed some of the other employees hired in full time positions were individuals that received lower scores than her.²¹⁶ Frustrated, she went to her father, Douglas McFarland, who served for nine years as the president of the Sacramento Branch of the Red Cap Union and was also an active member in the NAACP, for advice on how to handle her situation. He went to the personnel office and asked why his daughter was not given a full time job. The woman in personnel informed him that their general practice was to only hire blacks in part time positions. Even though there was no official policy in place, the California State government had an unofficial policy that blacks could not become full time employees. Instead of hiring applicants who received the highest score on the written test they were allowed to pick suitable applicants from the top three scores.²¹⁷ McFarland insisted on speaking to the head

²¹⁵ Ibid, 15.

²¹⁶ “ Douglas McFarland: Forty –Two Years of Service with the Local NAACP,” *Sacramento Observer*, November 14, 1973, LL-22.

²¹⁷ Dr. Roscoe Brewer was the first black dentist in Sacramento and in an interview he gave to the *Sacramento Observer* he noted the importance of Iverna’s hiring and the shift California State Department took in their hiring practices when Iverna received the highest score. His comments

of the department and demanded his daughter receive full time employment. The Sacramento Branch of the NAACP launched a campaign requesting she receive full time employment and called on the Oakland and Berkeley chapters of the NAACP for help.²¹⁸ Within ten days Anderson was hired as the first full-time black clerk in the California State Civil Service system.²¹⁹ However, she never received a promotion even though she started out over-qualified for her position and had an impeccable work history. Whites were still the gatekeepers of employment and they ensured blacks remained at the bottom of the employment ladder, where there was little to no upward mobility.

In addition to following unofficial policies, employers used other tactics to discourage black applicants from applying for jobs. One common tactic used in hiring blacks was to put them in positions where they thought they would fail. Gracie and Phillip Jenkins' father applied to be in the Fire Department. He passed the exam but they refused to hire him because there were no other blacks in the fire department. However, he was hired by the Postal Department and they gave him a route that encompassed the entire north side of Sacramento. Every day he carried a sixty-pound bag of mail on one arm and then would stack his other arm with mail as well. During the Christmas season, he had to leave the house at five in the morning and did not return until ten in the evening. His route was so long that when he retired his route was broken up into three different routes.²²⁰ Gracie

appeared in "Dr. Roscoe Brewer, Sacramento's First Black Dentist," *Sacramento Observer*, November 14, 1973; LL-64.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ "Douglas McFarland: Forty –Two Years of Service with the Local NAACP," *Sacramento Observer*, November 14, 1973, LL-22.

²²⁰ Gracie Brown Jenkins oral history interview by Clarence Caesar, January 18, 1984, Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento Ethnic Communities Survey, Black Oral Histories, 8-10.

recalled, “My mother said he was six feet tall when she married him and when he died he was shorter than I am and I’m five feet, three.”²²¹

Before the influx of blacks during the Second World War the community was small and black residents learned how to navigate the racial landscape. Racial discrimination and white hostility hampered blacks movement in the educational and employment sectors. Despite these barriers, black Sacramentans had fond memories of growing up regardless of the moments of discrimination and prejudice they experienced. However, the United State’s entrance into the Second World War brought significant changes to the capitol. People from all over the nation once migrants started to enter Sacramento during the Second World War the black community experienced significant changes. Vincent “Ted” Thompson who came to the city in the 1940s, remarked:

Well, it was typical of any community where Blacks are concerned, when there’s few Blacks in the community, the Blacks don’t have much problem. When the population of the Blacks begins to increase it seems that the Whites become intimidated then all of the barriers start going up and you find that the Blacks that lived here prior to the influx of the people that came here during World War Two had little difficulty in living.²²²

World War II: Opening Doors

World War II had a significant impact on state in the nation; however, California experienced a great deal of changes because of its geographical proximity to the Pacific. The federal government poured billions of dollars into the state and built military installations and wartime production plants. Just prior to the war, A. Philip Randolph the president of the Brotherhood for Sleeping Car Porter and the NAACP called for 150,000

²²¹ Ibid, 10.

²²² Vincent “Ted” Thompson, oral history interview by Clarence Caesar, January 18,1984, Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento Ethnic Communities Survey, Black Oral Histories 14.

blacks to march on Washington to protest discrimination in the defense industries.²²³ In response to the threat, Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, which prohibited racial discrimination in the national defense industry, and created the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC). Roosevelt realized in order to win the war he needed to mobilize both blacks and women to increase productivity and wartime morale. These initiatives along with infusion of federal funds opened the door for the employment of minorities in California. Millions of Americans moved to the Golden State, including thousands of blacks that saw an opportunity to leave menial paying jobs. For them, Executive Order 8802 served as a clarion call inviting them into a mythical Promised Land free of the Jim Crow practices and laws that plagued the South.²²⁴

During this decade, 338,000 African Americans moved into California to take advantage of employment opportunities, inexpensive housing, and the possibility of living in an economically prosperous state.²²⁵ Blacks entering the state had their own ideal of the California Dream, where they not only dreamed about a sunny landscape dotted with palm trees, but they had a large vision of the California Dream that encompassed freedom and

²²³ This dissertation is not focusing on the work of A. Philip Randolph but does acknowledge his activism led to significant changes for blacks. His focus on marches garnered significant attention and was utilized as an effective tactic over the course of his life. Several works speak to this are: Paula Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996) and Cornelius L. Bynum, *A. Philip Randolph and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

²²⁴ At the same moment the United States opened the doors for minorities in military production plants in California they also stripped individuals of their civil liberties. California was the target of Executive Order 9906, which authorized the removal of citizens to assembly centers and suspended the civil liberties of German, Italian, and Japanese American citizens. .

²²⁵ There are several works detailing the migration into California some of the most notable are: Quintard Taylor, *In Search of a Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998); and Lawrence B. De Graaf, Kevin Mulroy, Quintard Taylor, ed., *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000).

opportunity.²²⁶ Regardless of the Californian reality of oppression and discrimination against minorities, Blacks still entered the state with expectations of an environment free from racially discriminatory laws and practices.²²⁷ They were unfamiliar with the racial environment of California, but the tenuous racial landscape should have come as no surprise to these newcomers. Just as quickly as Roosevelt signed orders opening employment in the military, he also signed another Executive Order that limited the freedoms of thousands of minorities. In the spring of 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which authorized the War Department to designate “military areas” and forcibly remove any person they believed to be a danger. At the same time the state and federal government seemed to open its doors to minorities, hand written signs reading “Japs must go” were found all throughout Sacramento.²²⁸ In May of 1942, all Japanese residents of Sacramento were forced to abandon their homes, farms and businesses and were sent to inland internment camps. This complicated racial landscape revealed itself quickly to

²²⁶ There were a number of critical developments that gave African Americans more political leverage. A key change occurred during the New Deal where New Deal liberalism was linked with racial liberalism and the black community successfully used this connection to effectively lobby for antidiscrimination legislation. Several works looking at this linkage that broaden the scope of the origins of civil rights activities are: Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005) In addition there was an emergence of a strong civil rights unionism movement allowed workers to confront a system of racial capitalism that relegated African Americans to the lowest paying jobs. Several important works detailing the importance of unionism are: Robert Rodgers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

²²⁷ James R. Grossman discusses how black migrants moved to Chicago for an environment that promised them freedom and *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 4.

²²⁸ The removal of Japanese Americans from Sacramento and their internment experiences remains an understudied history. However, a few works reveal this tragic time is a memoir done by Kiyoko Sato entitled *Kiyoko's Story: A Japanese-American Family's Quest for the American Dream: A Memoir* (New York: Soho Press, 2009). The California Museum has also sought to bring this history to light in its exhibit, “Uprooted! Japanese Americans During World War II.” In addition California State University, Sacramento has an extensive oral history collection created by the Florin Japanese Citizens League Oral History Project and the North Central Valley Oral History Project.

newcomers who believed that pre-war black residents had to play by white society's rules and were unwilling participants in this game.

The population surge had a significant impact on the growth of Sacramento. The capitol had two aviation installations, McClelland Air Force Base and Mather Field, which created employment opportunities and facilitated the population boom in Sacramento.²²⁹

Clarence Canson remarked the small Sacramentan black community experienced immediate changes, "All of this changed after the war. Northern California had few blacks until after the war. Kaiser and his shipbuilding outfit opened up Oakland and brought them in by the boxcar loads."²³⁰ Mrs. Nona Henry, a resident of Sacramento since 1902, also remembered the changes the war brought to the black community and how thousands of blacks from the South poured into the city. She commented in an interview conducted in the 1970s that, "Many of these people came here expecting everything to be different from down south, but it was still prejudice here, just like everywhere else."²³¹ Grace Jenkins Brown, a member of the black Sacramentan middle -class, noticed the shift in the community and remarked:

And I think not only because of the heavy influx but because they came from areas where they hadn't experienced the same kind of restrictions that we did. They didn't know they couldn't do, so they did it. You know, I'd like, the ones that came here and applied to be teachers and they were mostly from the South, they applied to be teachers and they applied to be policeman and so forth, and they didn't realize that that wasn't being done here, so they came in and they applied and they were qualified and they passed the test and they couldn't be turned down and they moved in. When we grew up there were many times when my brothers and I were the only black children in the school.²³²

²²⁹ McClellan Air Force Bas focused on the repair and maintenance of aircrafts, engines and flight instruments, and operated as a training center for mechanics, and Mather Field, trained navigators and operated as flight training basis.

²³⁰ Clarence Canson, Oral Interview, 15.

²³¹ "Mrs. Nona Henry: Five Generations in the City of the Plains," *Sacramento Observer*, November 14, 1973, LL-16.

²³² Grace Brown Jenkins and Phillip Jenkins, oral history interview by Clarence Caesar, November 3, 1983, Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento Ethnic Communities Survey, Black Oral Histories, 17.

The promise of wartime employment caused a population boom and blacks came into the city from the mid-western and the southern states. Within a decade, the black Sacramentan community increased from 1,468 in 1940 to 4,538 in 1950.²³³ The overall growth in Sacramento's population transformed the capitol from a small agricultural city into an industrial city within a decade. Blacks came to work within the booming defense industries and others were stationed on military bases. According to the Executive Order, military employment was open to everyone regardless of race. However, the law failed to stipulate what types of jobs or the working environment that had to be provided. The order did not integrate the military; in fact integration did not occur in the military until the end of the war. The military adhered to the policy of separating the races during the war because they claimed it led to more efficiency and created more cohesion between the units. Officials also maintained black units received equal treatment and benefitted from the separation because they were placed with individuals of similar backgrounds.

This policy existed on McClellan Air Force Base where black troops were placed in separate units. In addition, similar to other bases, they were placed in segregated housing known as "Splinter City." Splinter City was located on the edge of the base and consisted of small two-by-four huts that held eight men in each building. There was no plumbing inside the units and black soldiers were forced to take showers located outside. On the same base, white soldiers had regular barracks and luxuries, including indoor showers.²³⁴ McClellan even had segregated facilities on the base for black and white personnel, including a

²³³ 1950 U.S. Census of Population, www.usgov.census.org (March 2010).

²³⁴ Robert D. Davila, "Obituary: WWII Veteran Walter Thompson, 90, Served As Sacramento City Ombudsman," *Sacramento Bee*, October 23, 2014,

separate theater, chapel and bowling alley.²³⁵ At McClellan, the base employed hundreds of women to work as secretaries and clerks. However, they separated black women from white women even though they worked in the same capacity. Jeroline Green arrived in Sacramento from Coffeyville, Kansas in 1943 to visit a friend. She loved the atmosphere of Sacramento and moved to the city. McClellan Air Force Base employed her and assigned her to a unit of employment called the all-black Warehouse 11 where she worked as an inventory clerk.²³⁶ Even though she was an inventory clerk and experienced discrimination she tried to make the best of the situation because they were fighting a bigger war overseas. Johnnie Ruth Luster also moved to Sacramento from Port Arthur, Texas because she heard there were good wages. She found work at McClellan making 79 cents an hour, but this was 26 cents less than her previous job in Texas. Even though conditions were not great, Luster remained in the Sacramento area and formed connections with other black women in the community.²³⁷

This new wave of black Sacramentans came into the city and expected to find housing, employment and educational possibilities. They were emboldened by the war and believed America's fight for freedom overseas meant their freedom as well. While many of these individuals were placed in lower paying positions, this population influx created the seeds necessary for the growth of a black professional class and a larger black population base that was willing to dismantle the racial boundaries in Sacramento. With the increase in black population and the war, even former residents of Sacramento expected significant changes and pushed to break through areas that were previously deemed off-limits. Robert

²³⁵ Geoffrey C. Ward, "The War: A Deadly Calling," Directed by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, PBS Studios, September 2007.

²³⁶ Ward, "The War."

²³⁷ "Mrs. Johnnie Ruth Luster: Thirty Years of Community Involvement," *Sacramento Observer*, November 14, 1973, LL-20.

Canson grew up in Sacramento and left to attend Tuskegee where he majored in Commercial Industries, a degree that focused on training individuals for business. Robert graduated and then enlisted in the Army and served for four years in an infantry replacement cadre in Texas. He then served overseas and fought in the European Theater for two years. In 1947, he returned to Sacramento expecting better racial conditions. Years later he recalled how he expected changes and remarked, “Well, I was hoping things would be different.”²³⁸ He discovered there were more employment doors that appeared open to blacks, but passage through the doors was still controlled and operated by whites.

Robert confronted this reality when he applied to become a police officer for the city. He took the police examination and easily passed the test, which guaranteed him an interview. The Chief of Police conducted Robert’s interview. The Chief served as a Colonel during the Second World War and interfaced with black officers. This interaction did not make the Chief more tolerant and the first thing he revealed to Robert was, “ he didn’t want any Black officers because he had Black officers under his command and he couldn’t get along with those in the military.”²³⁹ Nevertheless, the Chief hired him and told him he would be assigned to the information counter for a few weeks until he received formal training. However, when he showed up for his first day it was clear his presence was unwanted on the force. During the morning roll call, Robert’s name was announced and he was not assigned to the information counter but to “Beat Eight.” Beat Eight consisted of Sacramento’s West End and was considered the worse assignment on the force because it was the most crime-ridden sector of the capitol. The area was well known for gambling and prostitution and most of the residents were minorities. They sent Robert to the West End

²³⁸ Robert Canson, Oral Interview, 8.

²³⁹ Ibid.

without any training, no firearm, and without another officer to assist him. After hearing his assignment, Robert understood the commanding officer had no intention of working with him. He also recognized his assignment was meant to scare him away from the force. However, Robert knew he was in a perilous position as the first black officer hired by the Sacramento Police Department. He realized if he quit the force would use him as justification for not hiring more blacks. Robert also discerned that in order for others to be hired that he needed to not only complete his daily requirements as an officer, but he also needed to excel at his job.²⁴⁰

Prior to Robert's hiring, two white officers were assigned to the Beat Eight. These two officers had difficulty patrolling the area because they had preconceived notions about the West End and allowed these prejudices to influence how they treated the local residents. They interacted every individual in the area as a deviant regardless of whether the person warranted the classification. For example, both officers viewed females they encountered on the street as a prostitute. However, there were several churches located in the West End and several residents complained that on their way to church officers questioned their presence in the area. When Robert took over the beat he had no official police training, but he did enter the job equipped with an intimate understanding of the community. He approached the residents of the West End with this understanding and built a relationship of trust. His commanding officer anticipated hostility by the residents of the West End towards Robert, but they were receptive towards him and he enjoyed several successful years patrolling Beat Eight.²⁴¹

²⁴⁰ Robert Canson, oral history interview by Clarence Caesar, 15.

²⁴¹ Ibid, 12-14.

Robert's wife, Fannie Canson, also broke through another employment barrier in the city. She became the first black teacher hired by the Sacramento public schools since the hiring of Sarah Jones in 1894. As noted earlier, Sarah's hiring did not signify sweeping changes in employment practices within the schools and the school board refused to hire another black teacher until Fannie Canson.²⁴² When Fannie applied for the job she was more qualified than any other applicant at that time. She grew up in Georgia and did extremely well in school. Her parents sent her to Spelman College, and all black women's college in Atlanta. She continued her education at Tuskegee and graduated with a science degree in biological sciences.²⁴³ When she applied to be a teacher for the Sacramento schools in 1948 and the school board had difficulty deciding on whether to hire her or not. Despite her degree and qualifications for the job, the city board of education hired her on a probationary appointment.²⁴⁴ It took the school board two years to change her probationary status and within a few years they began to hire other black applicants.

Clarence was not as fortunate as his brother and sister-in-law in securing better employment opportunities in the capitol. Similar to other blacks who served during the war, Clarence believed in the "Double-V" campaign, which promoted victory over fascism abroad and racism at home.²⁴⁵ When he returned to Sacramento after the completion of his

²⁴² Robert Canson, Oral Interview, 5.

²⁴³ Fannie Canson worked her way up through the school system and become the director of the Ethnic Studies Program at Sacramento State College. She earned here PhD from the University of Oregon in the area of social psychology.

²⁴⁴ "Sacramento Hires Negro Teacher," *The Bakersfield Californian*, January 27, 1948, 2.

²⁴⁵ The concept of the "Double V" originated with the African American Press. *The Pittsburgh Courier* promoted the campaign and argued that black soldiers who volunteered to fight for the freedom of others over seas would help change the national disposition toward African Americans at home. Several exemplars of works covering the "Double V" campaign are: Andrew Buni, *Robert L. Vann of the Pittsburgh Courier: Politics and Black Journalism* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974); Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, *Double V: The Civil Rights Struggle for the Tuskegee Airman* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1992);

degree he believed that he could find easily find employment. He possessed a degree in tailoring and was convinced that with his father's connections, a degree, and the passage of policies opening employment opportunities in the military he would have little difficulty finding employment commensurate with his skills and abilities. He wanted to secure a position at McClellan Air Force Base because the wages were considerably higher than other positions. Even with his degree, the base hired him to be a dump truck driver- a position that did not even require a high school graduation. Clarence's immediate supervisor was a white man from Georgia whose highest level of education was the third grade. He only earned one hundred dollars a month at this job and they struggled to make ends meet.²⁴⁶ He decided to volunteer to go into the service and he assumed that with his college degree and ROTC experience that he could go in at the officer level. However, during his physical examination the doctor claimed that he saw a spot on his lungs and refused to pass him for qualifications because of physical problems. Clarence was outraged by the prognosis that this doctor had given him and he went to another doctor for an examination. The doctor completed the same examination and found no spot on his lung. This doctor told Clarence, "Well you have just run into prejudice."²⁴⁷

Canson and her husband were not sure what they would do in Sacramento and if they could stay in a city that provided them with few employment options. Even with two jobs, they had difficulty making ends meet. During one summer they took a long vacation with their children that helped them change their focus. On the first leg of their vacation they attended a conference with the Prince Hall Masons in Portland, Oregon. Canson's

Jonathan Rosenberg, *How Far the Promised Land?: World Affairs and the American Civil Rights Movement from the First World War to Vietnam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

²⁴⁶ Virna Canson, "Waging the War," 16.

²⁴⁷ Ibid, 16.

husband was a Prince Hall Mason and she served as a matron of the Adah Chapter No. 1, Order of the Eastern Star.²⁴⁸ After attending the ceremonies, they traveled from Portland along the Columbia River visiting the states of Wyoming, Colorado, North Dakota, and Iowa. On their trip they visited Canson's uncle, Dr. Richard Dobson, and his wife Naomi. Dr. Richard Dobson was an extremely successful doctor in Sioux City and his wife was very active within in the community. Canson's uncle and husband spent a great deal of time together during that trip and he encouraged Clarence to do more with his life. He urged Clarence to search for more than government employment and to pursue an advanced degree.²⁴⁹ When Clarence returned from the trip he decided he no longer wanted to work at McClellan Field. He enrolled in law school at McGeorge and became the first black graduate of the University of the Pacific.

Despite the city's willingness to hire a few black Sacramentans, these appointments did not open floodgates for others to enter. The majority of the black Sacramentan community still lacked access to better employment and housing. Robert Self noted in his work that, "California's version of segregation meant that African American workers in every sector of the local economy faced job ceilings."²⁵⁰ However, these black migrants had a sense of entitlement and they believed the California Dream was belonged to them. Adding to the increased activism was the overall national increase in NAACP membership, which grew to half a million, and created the financial and power base the NAACP needed

²⁴⁸ The Masons were an important organization for the Black Middle Class and provided men a socially prestigious organization. For more on blacks and the masonry movement see: William A. Muraskin, *Middle Class Blacks in a White Society: Prince Hall Freemasonry in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); David Gray, *Inside Prince Hall* (Aylett, VA: Anchor Communications, 2004) and Joseph A. Walkes, *Black Square & Compass: 200 Years of Prince Hall Freemasonry* (Richmond, VA: Macoy Publishing & Masonic Supply Co. Inc, 2006)

²⁴⁹ Canson, "Waging the War," 16-17.

²⁵⁰ Self, *American Babylon*, 57.

to challenge the white establishment.²⁵¹ In addition, black Sacramentans started to believe that not only did they deserve civil rights but that they were also entitled to these rights.

Following the War, a stronger more visible black professional class emerged in Sacramento. The black community was also strengthened by black G.I.s who remained in the capitol after the war. They had traveled and seen the world and expected better treatment at home. For instance, in 1948 Canson's classmate at Tuskegee, Nathaniel Colley moved to Sacramento and started a law practice.²⁵² When he arrived, he entered at a time when the black community was growing again and were becoming more politically active but discrimination was still very prevalent. He remarked, "It's very difficult to go over and fight for the freedom of other people and come back home and accept a kind of slavery for yourself. I think that general awakening had a lot to do with it."²⁵³ He and his wife, Jerlean, were startled by the overt discrimination they encountered in Sacramento. During their first month in the city, they went to the market to purchase their weekly groceries. They went to the meat counter and requested a choice round steak but the butcher denied their request. He informed the Colley's that the choice cuts were reserved for whites only. Infuriated, Jerlean told the butcher: "But my husband served for two years in the South Pacific as Captain in the Army. He won three battle stars and a unit citation. And besides, both my husband and I hold B.S. degrees from Tuskegee Institute. My husband is a prize-winning

²⁵¹ Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: The New Press, 2009), 331.

²⁵² David Covin in his work, *Black Politics*, attributes individuals like Nathan Colley for bringing resurgence to the black professional class. Nathan Colley became a lawyer for the NAACP and his work is often cited as the most important of black Sacramentans.

²⁵³ Nathaniel Sextus Colley, oral history interview by Clarence Caesar, March 2, 1984, Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento Ethnic Communities Survey, Black Oral Histories, 1983/146, 16.

graduate of the Yale University Law School in the class of June 1948. Yet we must eat the ends and scraps or go hungry?”²⁵⁴

The war’s population growth helped bring the black community together and created the foundation for the development of the black leadership and activism. In 1952, the *Colorformia*, a new black magazine out of San Francisco, highlighted Sacramento’s black community and praised the black leadership and the number of jobs held by blacks. The monthly magazine was devoted to highlighting the achievements of blacks in California.²⁵⁵ The magazine included pieces on long time residents of Sacramento and also incorporated those who had entered during the war and postwar years. *Colorformia* showcased Dunlap’s Dining Room, which was a long time staple of the community, as well as Thompson’s Funeral Home, opened by Ted Thompson and his wife Georgia in 1949. The magazine ten-page spread on the city also emphasized the strength of the Sacramento Branch of the NAACP. The magazine suggested that a “good barometer of any sizeable colored community is the functioning of its local NAACP. The Sacramento Branch has set something of a record with membership drives and volunteer work by its members.”²⁵⁶

When Canson first arrived in Sacramento, the black community was still suffering from the repercussions of the Great Depression. The depression depleted the economic resources of the black community and several individuals from the black professional class moved to southern California. Canson did not have the historical memory of a robust black community and longed for a stronger more unified community. Instead, she saw a lack of a strong black professional class and opportunities for black Sacramentans even those who

²⁵⁴ Nathaniel Colley, Letter to the Editor of the Sacramento Bee, July 22, 1948. Center for Sacramento History, Nathaniel S. and Jerlean J. Colley Papers.

²⁵⁵ “New Negro Magazine Appears in California,” *Jet*, (May 8, 1952), 51.

²⁵⁶ “Sacramento Branch NAACP Has Strong Community Support,” *Colorformia: The California Magazine* 1:4 (1952): 16.

were highly educated. She was also astounded that the major social event among black people was the garbage men's picnic. The environments she had lived in before had more respectable social events, she commented, "I had been used to fraternity and sorority dances, and that kind of thing."²⁵⁷ She later stated, "I felt that I could do something to improve the atmosphere in Sacramento, and I didn't want my children to grow up without any role models."²⁵⁸ She did not want her children to grow up in a world where they were not accepted. In the 1940s, when her son was fairly young he stomped into the house, went into the bathroom and closed the door. She heard the water running for a long time and after ten minutes or so she went in to see what he was doing in the bathroom. Clarence Jr. was standing at the sink washing his face and arms over and over again. When she asked him why he was washing like that he told her, "The other children laughed at me and said I was dirty because I have brown skin. I'm trying to wash this brown skin off me." Canson's heart broke over her son's pain and she recalled, "I wanted him to know that the world was like a painting and that it takes a lot of different colors to make such a beautiful creation."²⁵⁹ Her path to activism was created by a desire to create an environment where her son felt accepted and where her family could flourish without discriminatory practices. The war brought significant changes to the capitol city and she knew that these changes could translate to creating the California Dream, of racial equality and opportunity, she and other migrants dreamed about in the Golden State.

²⁵⁷ Canson, "Waging the War," 12.

²⁵⁸ Virna Canson, *Sacramento Observer*, Feb. 13, 2002, www.highbeam.com. (April 2010).

²⁵⁹ "Thoughts After Mrs. Canson's Retirement; An Exclusive Interview in 1995 She Recalled the Struggle." 4/16/2003, Vol. 40, Issue 18, pg. 11.

Chapter 4

“In Search of a Picket Fence”

Whites could get a house for \$350 down and have only orange crates for furniture, but blacks in better economic conditions could not buy houses in many parts of Sacramento.²⁶⁰
- Virna Canson

In 1947, Canson drove under the arch of the Oak Park neighborhood and down the tree lined street. Earlier in the week she discovered a lovely craftsman style house with a large front porch was for sale in the neighborhood. Canson had lived in Sacramento for a few years and was familiar with the Oak Park neighborhood. She heard from her husband’s family and others in Sacramento that the community was a family friendly neighborhood. She loved the feel of the community and the style of houses when she drove past other houses she noticed children playing in the front yards. Canson waited for a while and when the agent finally arrived she breathed a sigh of relief when the agent welcomed her into the home. She was excited when she learned there were no racially restrictive covenants in the Oak Park neighborhood. Canson visualized the placement of her furniture and she could envision her children playing in the yard. In the midst of her planning, the realtor broke into her thoughts and warned even if the homeowner agreed to sell her the home she may run into issues securing a loan from the bank. Canson quickly submitted an offer, but true to the real estate agent’s word, the bank refused to approve their housing loan.²⁶¹ The bank did not reject their application because they were not qualified, but because the house was located in a primarily white neighborhood. If they granted her loan then her presence in the

²⁶⁰ Elizabeth Fernandez, “Virna Canson: Fighting Fire With Fire,” *The Crisis*, Vol. 90, No. 6, June/July 1983, 26.

²⁶¹ Virna Canson, “Hunt for a Home,” *The Progressive*, April 1954 in National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Region I, Records, BANC MSS 78/180 c, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Box 7, Folder: 4.

neighborhood would threaten the value of the surrounding homes. Canson later told a reporter with *The Crisis*, “Whites could get a house for \$350 down and have only orange crates for furniture, but blacks in better economic conditions could not buy houses in many parts of Sacramento.”²⁶²

This chapter examines the historical prevalence of racially restrictive practices in housing, which created a two-track housing system in Sacramento. This two-track system provided easier paths for white home ownership while simultaneously excluding minorities from home ownership. This process also led to the emergence of de facto segregation in Sacramento because neighborhoods remained racially homogenous. In both the private and public housing sectors, informal and formal policies, race was used as the primary determining factor in qualifying for the full benefits of home ownership. Home ownership became a vehicle to propel the white lower class into the middle class, but exclusionary housing practices prohibited blacks from these gains. In Sacramento there were three main practices used to limit access to housing: racially restrictive covenants, the informal enforcement of these covenants both by homeowners and realtors, and mortgage redlining. These practices strengthened white societal beliefs and protected white economic interests within the housing market. In addition, these policies severely restricted black’s ability to climb the housing economic ladder and led to long-term economic consequences.²⁶³ These

²⁶² Elizabeth Fernandez, “Virna Canson: Fighting Fire With Fire,” *The Crisis*, Vol. 90, No. 6, June/July 1983, 26.

²⁶³ This argument is based upon Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s work *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, (New York: Routledge, 1986, 1994), argument that the racializing of a group’s position occurs because of social, economic and political arrangements are controlled by the dominant group. Racial formation takes place then through the inequitable exchange and distribution processes and by market imperfections, political power structures, or the search for secure means of labor control. (48)

practices did not translate into short-term losses for blacks, but led to generations of inequality of income and wealth between the races.

In addition, this chapter reveals a larger narrative of the fight for housing rights in Sacramento that included more leaders than those previously recognized. Nathaniel Colley's work as an attorney gained him local, state and national notoriety as a leader in the struggle to end housing discrimination in both public and private housing. While he played an integral part in the process there was a larger network of leaders involved in the fight for housing. These voices need to be brought forward to show the existence of a larger grassroots organization, which galvanized the community into action. Without their tireless efforts and ability to apply public pressure to governing institutions, the landmark cases Colley represented would have remained out of the courts. This chapter does not seek to diminish Colley's contributions as a leader in the struggle for black freedom in the Golden State, but it does strive to offer a broader account that includes others engaged in the battle for racial equality. Furthermore, California introduced and passed civil rights legislation well before other states and they became leaders in the black freedom struggle, which placed the state as a model for other states to follow. California's trope of exceptionalism alleged liberalism and the acceptance of civil rights emerged in the Golden State first.²⁶⁴

²⁶⁴ The idea of California exceptionalism derives from the idea presented by historians such as Albert Broussard, *Black San Francisco: The Struggle for Racial Equality in the West 1900-1954* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1993); Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999); Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004); and Douglas Flamming, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005) who posit California had a "Golden Era" in which Black communities emerged and flourished for a time unfettered by Jim Crow laws. However, my work is suggesting California's relationship with minority community growth, the passage of civil rights legislation before the federal government, and the continued activism of the Black middle class translates not just to a "Golden Era" but to a larger narrative of California exceptionalism.

Yet, the path to the passage of civil rights legislation was paved by the activism of individuals working to chip away at discriminatory practices within the Golden State's capitol.

During the war, Sacramento's entire population increased rapidly and the city's housing developers struggled to keep up with the demand for housing. Throughout Sacramento County, the overall population exploded from 170,00 residents to nearly half a million by 1960.²⁶⁵ New arrivals were forced into substandard housing and when developers started building they focused on expanding suburbs, which remained difficult for blacks to move into due to the practice of redlining. Black residents even discovered white residents were unwilling to rent or sell homes to blacks. In their search for housing, blacks uncovered California's longer history of racially exclusionary housing practices, which were not only isolated to large urban centers, but also extended into smaller secondary cities and rural communities. These practices were deeply rooted within the social fabric of the state. Dismantling housing discrimination required a multifaceted approach because exclusionary practices were found in multiple levels of the home buying process and involved everyone from the developers, realtors, banking institutions, and were upheld by white homeowners. However, the influx of more black migrants, particularly those in the middle class, strengthened efforts to establish fair housing and brought unlikely leaders to the forefront.

When Canson received her rejection for her home loan she realized the laws on the books in California had not prevented her from purchasing a home; on the other hand, there were other housing practices in place that led to segregation in the Sacramento housing

²⁶⁵ Steven Avella, ed. *The Good Life: Sacramento's Consumer Culture* (San Francisco, Arcadia Publishing 2008), 102.

market. These housing policies and practices within the banking system, the federal government, and within the hands of private individuals were harder to navigate than the overt laws of segregation pervasive in the South. Canson's inability to purchase a home in a more desirable neighborhood enraged her and she wanted to find a solution for this injustice. She eventually found a home on Lotus Street but from her initial home buying experience she decided to become more active in changing these policies so her children could grown up in a better environment and set her on the path to become the "Mother of the Civil Rights Movement" in the West.

Early Racial Restrictions in Housing

Canson's struggle for housing occurred because the state allowed for the development of racially restrictive policies and practices, which effectively limited housing options for minorities and led to de facto segregation. California's housing practices and laws were put into place to protect realtors and the property value for white homeowners and impeded the economic position of blacks. The Golden State permitted realtors, banks and homeowners to implement discriminatory rules in the area of housing, because access to housing was not equated as an economic right. These exclusionary activities started with the population boom during the Gold Rush. These measures already existed in other states, but they appeared out of place given the development of population in Sacramento. From the very beginning, the city was never a racially homogenous city and comprised of people consisting of various races, ethnicities, and nationalities.²⁶⁶ During the Gold Rush, migrants from all over the world descended upon Sacramento including Japanese, Chinese,

²⁶⁶ This dissertation is focusing on the development of the city after the Gold Rush and the statehood. However, it should be noted Sacramento's population prior to the gold rush consisted of Native peoples, Mexicans, Spanish, Chinese, Californios and others. The entire state held a multiplicity of other peoples and this led to a unique racial landscape.

Italians, Slovenians, Germans, Irish and black Americans. The city had a unique population basis, with one-third of the Sacramentan population consisting of people who were foreign born. At this time, most Sacramentan immigrants, regardless of race or ethnicity, were located in the West End because of its proximity to the railroad yards, which served as the commercial and industrial center of the city.²⁶⁷ In the 1880s the population increased to nearly twenty thousand residents in the capitol.²⁶⁸ Sacramento's city center was overcrowded and people who lived in the city for a few years and now had the economic means for upward mobility. Real estate speculators observed this growth and assumed the population boom that occurred in southern California was finally making its way to the capitol.²⁶⁹ They turned their attention to creating housing communities to attract families and developed planned suburbs.

One of the first suburbs in Sacramento, Oak Park, was part of larger expansion of family friendly communities. The developers envisioned a neighborhood that included all of the amenities of a city, but housed within a smaller environment that would help promote family homes, nature, health and culture. These types of communities, or agriburbs, were carved out of lands formerly used for farming and provided families with enough property for a house and small garden.²⁷⁰ Sacramento's city landscape was dotted with farms and ranches and developers wanted to project a familial atmosphere tied in with the imagery of

²⁶⁷ Steven M. Avella, *Sacramento and the Catholic Church: Shaping a Capital City* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2008).

²⁶⁸ Historical Census Populations of Counties and Incorporated Cities in California, 1850-2010, California State Data Center, August 2011.

²⁶⁹ Southern California experienced tremendous growth in the 1880s due to the completion and competition of the railroad. Several important works discussing this boom are: Douglas Lowell, *The California Southern Railroad and the Growth of San Diego, Part I, The Journal of San Diego History, San Diego Historical Society Quarterly* 31:4 (Fall 1985).

²⁷⁰ An upcoming work on the phenomenon of an agriburb and the growth of these in rural areas of California is by Paul J.P. Sandul, *California Dreaming: Boosterism, Memory and Rural Suburbs* (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2014)

rural America. Builders carefully cultivated an image of Sacramento as both a country town and a bustling metropolis.²⁷¹ They used the success of the housing boom of southern California as a promotional tactic for selling lots. They promised buyers their investments were sound because their lots would double in value within one year.²⁷²

The Oak Park Association purchased two hundred and thirty acres of farmland and divided out the land into smaller tracts to sell. The association wanted to create the feeling of a neighborhood that was completely separated from the fast pace of the city. The builders in built their own services including an electric plant and streetcar lines.²⁷³ The streetcar lines provided residents with the luxury of fast transit and connected Oak Park to downtown Sacramento. The builders deliberately crafted a family friendly atmosphere and constructed a pavilion where residents gathered for dances, picnics, and concerts.²⁷⁴ By 1895, the neighborhood also included a baseball park, a three-lap bicycle track, a grand stand 200 feet long, a theater, a zoo and a restaurant.²⁷⁵ Oak Park gave the residents the experience of living within a resort community without the high costs. Sacramentans bought into the builders' concept and the neighborhood quickly grew. By the 1900s, Oak Park's amenities also included grocery stores, a library, a large park, and schools for the children. However, one of the most appealing features of Oak Park was an amusement park called Joyland. Joyland was the city's only amusement park and offered Sacramentans respite from the fast

²⁷¹ Paul J. P. Sandul, "Both 'Country Town' and 'Bustling Metropolis': How Boosterism, Suburbs, and Narrative Helped Shape Sacramento's Identity and Environmental Sensibilities," in *River City and Valley Life: An Environmental History of the Sacramento Region* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013) ed. Christopher J. Castaneda, Lee M. A. Simpson, 164

²⁷² Edwin K. Alsip & CO., Real Estate Agents Advertisement, Appeared in *Sacramento Daily Record Union*, 1887.

²⁷³ The idea was very similar to the development of Company Towns where individuals had safe, comfortable environment and made them more industrious citizens.

²⁷⁴ *Sacramento Daily Union*, 91:98 (June 4, 1896).

²⁷⁵ "Pulse of Western Progress," *Omaha Daily Bee*, April 5, 1897, 5.

pace of work and city life. Sacramentans could easily get to Joyland because of the streetcars. After a few years of opening, Joyland remained open in the evening hours because lights, which were provided by the newly built hydroelectric power plant on the upper American River, illuminated the park. Oak Park was considered a family resort, “parents with children may feel perfectly safe riding out upon the streetcars of the company and spend a day or evening” at Oak Park.²⁷⁶ Joyland also helped attract prospective buyers into the Oak Park neighborhood.

Regardless of the image of a resort community, Oak Park was not a neighborhood designed for upper classes but for individuals from the middle and working classes. The majority of the first residents of Oak Park worked for the Southern Pacific Railroad shops as carpenters, clerks, painters, and blacksmiths.²⁷⁷ Developers wanted to make profits but they limited sales to a particular type of working or middle-class family, white families. During this time period, there were very few black families in Sacramento. Yet, Oak Park Developers felt compelled to include strict racial segregation policies because they wanted to keep racial minorities out of their “family friendly” neighborhood. They incorporated long-term building restrictions on all of the housing lots and wrote strict racial covenants into purchase agreements. Racial covenants not only prohibited developers from selling homes to minorities, but also prevented private homeowners from selling their homes in the future to minorities. These developers did not invent the practice of incorporating racial covenants; the practice was common throughout the nation and proliferated with the growth

²⁷⁶ Canson, “Waging the War,” 18.

²⁷⁷ Lee M.A. Simpson, ed., *Sacramento's Oak Park* (San Francisco: Arcadia Publishing, 2004), 7.

of suburbanization.²⁷⁸ However, the practice seemed out of place given the lack of minorities in Sacramento.

Other developers in Sacramento followed Oak Park's lead and incorporated racial covenants in their sales agreements. These practices were enforced by realtors who followed the guidelines set forth by the National Association of Realtors Board (NAREB), the leading association of realtors in the United States, regarding race mixing in the sale of homes. Realtors throughout the nation followed NAREB's practices and they instructed fellow members to avoid "mix racing in the sale of property" because this decreased home values in the area.²⁷⁹ In 1913, the California Real Estate Law publication, which was distributed to all realtors, had templates of purchase contracts for realtors with the following clause; "No part of said premises shall be sold, leased, or rented, or suffered to be occupied by as tenants for hire or gratuitously, any person not of the white or Caucasian race."²⁸⁰ In 1924, NAREB expanded definitions of sale in their National Code, Article 34, which stated: "A realtor should never be instrumental in introducing into a neighborhood a character of property or occupancy, members of any race or nationality, or any individual whose presence will clearly be detrimental to property values in the neighborhood."²⁸¹ Under NAREB's code of conduct, realtors had to abide by the national code and any realtor found in violation of the code was subject to expulsion or suspension from the local board and had their license revoked.²⁸² In 1926, the U.S Supreme Court provided the legal basis for the continued usage of restrictive covenants in the *Corrigan v. Buckley* case. In *Corrigan v.*

²⁷⁸ Lee, *Sacramento's Oak Park*, 15.

²⁷⁹ Stephen Meyer, *As Long as They Don't Move Next Door: Segregation and Racial Conflict in American Neighborhoods* (Lanham, MD: Roman and Littlefield, 1999), 7.

²⁸⁰ W.G. Lincoln, *California: The Law of Real Estate* (Los Angeles: Gillespie, 1913), 84.

²⁸¹ National Association of Real Estate Boards, *Codes of Ethics*, Adopted 1924, Part III, Article 34.

²⁸² Luigi Laurent, *Property Values and Race: Studies in Seven Cities*, Special Research Report to the Commission on Race and Housing (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), 17.

Buckley, thirty white people owned twenty-five parcels of land agreed to not sell or lease their land to anyone of African American descent. Irene Corrigan went against the agreement and sold a lot and her house to a black couple, but one of the resident filed a lawsuit to prevent the sale. The case worked its way to the Supreme Court and the court refused to hear the case because they argued state constitutional amendments were not applicable to individual action.²⁸³ By 1928, the use of race covenants was standard in home sales throughout California and the nation.

Local real estate agents, land developers and white homeowners justified discriminatory practices because they alleged blacks and other minorities led to a depreciation of property values in the entire neighborhood. They went out of their way to prevent racial mixing in neighborhoods and believed they were preserving the economic integrity of neighborhoods. Even local papers openly advised buyers to make sure they had deed restrictions in place before purchasing homes. For example, the *Sacramento Bee* warned prospective buyers to be cautious of the type of home they were purchasing and their neighbor, “be sure what the color and race of his next door neighbor will not be.”²⁸⁴ Racially exclusionary practices were rarely challenged because there were few minorities in Sacramento and real estate laws supported their practices. Even though Sacramento housing developers did not invent racial covenants the fact they used them from the beginning of planned neighborhood development reveals the city’s commitment to preserve racial homogeneous neighborhoods and discriminatory policies.²⁸⁵

²⁸³ *Corrigan vs. Buckley* 271, U.S. 323 (1926).

²⁸⁴ “Subdivision Trend Shows Lot Purchasers Demand Restriction,” *Sacramento Bee*, April 13, 1928.

²⁸⁵ For more on the process of suburbanization and an increase in racial covenants see: Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization*

Another effective tactic in enforcing racial exclusion in housing was restricting access to home loans. Prior to the creation of the federal mortgage programs, home loans proved impossible for most Americans in the middle and working classes. During the first few years of development in Sacramento, prospective buyers relied on borrowing money from well-to-do individuals. Based on this process, potential borrowers were heavily screened and blacks were denied mortgages.²⁸⁶ Due to the limited amount of mortgages and access to credit, the majority of suburban communities remained white. However, there were a few exceptions and blacks found ways to purchase homes and land. In 1906, Isaiah Dunlap and his family became the first black residents in Oak Park.²⁸⁷ He purchased a lot on Fourth Avenue and built a one story Colonial Revival house, which had a large porch that ran across the entire front of the house. Regardless of the racial restrictions, the family was well received by their neighbors and they stayed in the neighborhood for decades. During the 1930s, Isaiah's son George opened up a small restaurant in the dining room in the house and served southern food. George became an accomplished chef working for the Southern Pacific's dining cars and turned his culinary skill into a booming restaurant. With George's cooking, his restaurant, Dunlap's Dining Room, became known as the place to eat in Sacramento. However, most of Dunlap's Dining Room's patrons were from middle class white families and prominent members in the community and government. Even though

of the United States (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Robert Fogelson, *Bourgeois Nightmares: Suburbia, 1870-1930* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

²⁸⁶ Hernandez, This process of borrowing from someone well to do was also based upon one's connections with the community as well.

²⁸⁷ Lawrence Adams, "A Place Called Home," in *Sacramento's Oak Park*, edited by Lee M.A. Simpson (San Francisco: Arcadia Publishing, 2004), 17.

there were no race restrictions, blacks did not feel welcomed or well received by other patrons so many chose not to frequent the restaurant.²⁸⁸

Other black Sacramentans found ways to circumvent the home buying process because they came into the state with enough economic resources to purchase large tracts of land. For example, Reverend Hercules Benbow moved into Sacramento and he purchased a large expanse of land in Del Paso Heights. He had a home built on the property and became one of the largest landowners in the area in the 1920s and 1930s.²⁸⁹ He also used the land and built houses and hotels to house people migrating into Sacramento.²⁹⁰ Sacramento was still relatively small and black Sacramentans found pockets throughout the city where they could purchase homes or lots of land outside of planned communities. Yet, most of the early population of black Sacramentans could only find housing in the West End because of racial covenants.

Opening Up Access to Mortgages

Before changes in mortgage practices, home ownership was challenging for most Americans, regardless of race. Home ownership required a degree of wealth and remained a privilege reserved for the upper classes. Prior to the 1930s, mortgage terms were shorter in duration, typically five to ten years, and featured “bullet” payments.²⁹¹ This type of mortgage required borrowers to pay their loans in larger, bullet payments, within a few years or borrowers were forced to refinance their loans. During the Great Depression,

²⁸⁸ William Burg, *Sacramento Renaissance: Art, Music, and Activism in California's Capital City* (Charleston, NC: The History Press, 2013), 4. Dunlap's restaurant operated until 1968 and during those years the establishment was viewed as a dining destination for the social and political elite of Sacramento.

²⁸⁹ Elizabeth Benbow Johnson Love, oral interview by Clarence Caesar, Sacramento Ethnic Communities Survey, 1983/146, December 10, 1983, Center for Sacramento History, 1.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁹¹ Richard K. Green and Susan M Wachter, “The American Mortgage in Historical and International Context,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 19:4 (Fall 2005): 94

mortgages underwent drastic changes because of the wave of foreclosures. Throughout the Great Depression, homeowners saw the values of their homes drop by fifty percent. This put both borrowers and financiers in grave financial risk and the entire housing industry faced economic collapse. Between 1931 and 1935, the rate of foreclosures throughout the nation averaged 250,000 per year.²⁹²

In response to the economic catastrophe, the federal government decided intervention was necessary to help pull the nation out of the Depression. The government's involvement in the housing industry changed the nature of home loans and the housing industry. Hoover believed the federal government had to get involved because a robust housing market was on facet for revitalizing the economy.²⁹³ As historian Robert Self noted, "Hoover argued that a housing market more accessible to large numbers of working-class Americans could become an economic engine on par with the automobile industry."²⁹⁴ When Roosevelt took office the economy was in shambles and he proposed a plan that offered aid to homeowners. To stimulate the housing market the government introduced three key agencies: the Home Owner's Loan Corporation (HOLC), the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and the Federal National Mortgage Association (FNMA). They also changed the nature of mortgages and introduced a fixed-rate, self-amortizing, long-term mortgage, which eliminated bullet payments and refinancing loans.²⁹⁵ Under these new terms, mortgages became more obtainable and took on a more modern shape as a result of the federal government's help. In addition to changing mortgage terms, the federal

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Amy Hillier, "Who Received Loans? Home Owners' Loan Corporation Lending and Discrimination in Philadelphia in the 1930s," *Journal of Planning History* 2:1 (February 2003): 5.

²⁹⁴ Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 32.

²⁹⁵ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press), 196.

government also gave banks mortgage protection: which protected them from catastrophic loss in the future.

The HOLC was a pivotal in revitalizing the housing market. The HOLC's main function was to refinance mortgages. One way they accomplished this task was by purchasing delinquent loans from private lenders and then reissuing mortgages to borrowers. They also distributed just over three billion dollars; which enabled owners to recover homes they lost to foreclosure, to refinance their home if they were in the process of foreclosure, and allowed for individuals to purchase homes.²⁹⁶ This infusion of capital reinvigorated the housing market and allowed individuals from the middle and working classes to purchase homes. The stabilization of the housing market also led to an expansion of housing construction and created jobs. The middle classes benefitted from access to these mortgages and gained a foothold into the housing market. Many prospective homebuyers set their sights on purchasing homes outside of the city center and moved into the suburbs. Builders had started to shift their building efforts on building planned communities in the suburbs, which appealed to middle class buyers. However, the benefits provided by the HOLC did not apply equally and the organization incorporated qualification standards that perpetuated practices of racial segregation in the housing market.²⁹⁷

In an attempt to bring economic stability to the housing market, the HOLC established loan qualification standards meant to ensure recipients had the financial resources to pay their mortgage. These qualifications were based upon applicant's annual income; however,

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ For more on the New Deal programs see Arthur Schlesinger, *The Age of Roosevelt: The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958); Paul K. Conkin, *The New Deal* (New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell, 1975); Anthony J. Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-1940* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989); and Gail Radford, *Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

the HOLC also used race as a key determinant for loans. The federal government asked the HOLC to examine 239 cities and produce “residential security maps” that indicated the level of investment security.²⁹⁸ The HOLC came up with a rating scale to evaluate risk factors and undesirable neighborhoods. This led to the creation of color-coded map, which designated newer neighborhoods as green, developed neighborhoods that were good but not the best were blue, areas considered in transition were yellow, and neighborhoods with “undesirable populations” and “unstable incomes” were red. Under the new rating system, neighborhoods in the red area rarely received HOLC loans and were often comprised of people of color.²⁹⁹ In addition to mapping, the Federal Housing Administration also created rules and regulations for banks to use to determine sound areas of investment and the dispersal of loans. In this process, the FHA decided not to challenge existing discriminatory housing practices that segregated neighborhoods. The FHA actually reinforced these practices by introducing the concept of redlining by using the maps created by the HOLC to evaluate the risk of issuing loans to borrowers in urban neighborhoods.³⁰⁰ The racialized housing principles appeared in print in the *Federal Housing Administration Underwriting Manual*, which suggested that changes in the “racial occupancy” of a neighborhood depreciated property values and contributed to instability.³⁰¹ In conjunction with the HOLC and FHA racialized practices, local practices and real estate laws allowed for racial steering

²⁹⁸ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 199. Kenneth Jackson was the first scholar to connect HOLC’s color-coded maps to the practice of redlining.

²⁹⁹ Douglas Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 51.

³⁰⁰ An excellent overview of this process is found in Massey’s, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*.

³⁰¹ Federal Housing Administration, *Underwriting Manual* (Washington, D.C.: National Archives, 1936). Sec. 935-937.

and discriminatory practices prevented blacks and other people of color from accessing low-interest rate loans and housing.

Not only were home mortgages an issue during the Great Depression, but also access to any kind of affordable housing was a problem throughout the nation. The problem was greater in California because thousands of migrants came to the state in search of employment in the agricultural sector. Individuals and families, known as Okies, experienced some of the worst hardships because the dust bowl decimated their livelihoods and their homes. Okies entered the state completely destitute and in desperate need of economic assistance.³⁰² In Sacramento, thousands of Okies entered the valley in search of work in the fruit orchards or in the canneries. However, there was no public housing so migrants built tiny one-room shacks by the American River. Some called these shacks Sacramento's Hooverville and others called it an Okieville. Regardless of what locals called the tin shack village, city officials were troubled by its presence. Sacramento's Hooverville also caused concern for local residents who correlated these shantytowns with unsanitary conditions, unsavory characters, and high crime rates.³⁰³

The federal government responded to some of the housing concerns caused by the lack of housing for the poor. The passage of the Housing Act of 1937, also known as the Wagner-Steagall Act provided subsidies to local public housing agencies to improve housing for low-income families. The goal of the act was to provide short-term assistance for those struggling in the job market. The introduction of public housing was never conceived of as providing long-term permanent housing, but it did create a permanent low-rent public

³⁰² James N. Gregory's work *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) provides an overview of the hardships Okies faced leaving their homes and the difficult task they had in establishing roots in California.

³⁰³ "Slum Clearance Committee Asks Action by County," *The Sacramento Bee*, September 2, 1939.

housing program.³⁰⁴ The goal of public housing was to offer unemployed workers temporary housing until they could get on their feet again and to stimulate the construction industry. The Wagner-Steagall Act infused millions of dollars into the building industry and gave hundreds of people employment.³⁰⁵ Several organizations in Sacramento were concerned about the lack of housing for migrants and petitioned for funds from the act to assist with the building of low cost housing.³⁰⁶

Cheap Loans and Access

In the 1940s, Americans desire for home ownership became intertwined with the ideals of the American Dream. Home ownership came to be associated with one's social standing and provided a way to climb the economic ladder. By the middle of the 1940s, America entered a more optimistic time. The war efforts were going well and national economic growth was booming due to wartime production. Within this economic climate, President Roosevelt delivered his State of Union address and millions heard the address on their radios.³⁰⁷ The President spoke about the progress in the war and promised a victory for Americans. He shifted his focus away from the war and spoke about an "Economic Bill of Rights," which became known as the "Second Bill of Rights." The address came out of America's experience with the Great Depression and Roosevelt's belief there was a right to economic security.³⁰⁸ Roosevelt claimed everyone had the right to a job, decent housing,

³⁰⁴ NPS, Public Housing in the United States, 1933-1949, Appendix IV, 2.

³⁰⁵ United States (1937). "United States Housing Act of 1937." 50 (Part 1).

³⁰⁶ "Plans for Local Housing Project Go to Washington," *The Sacramento Bee*, May 17, 1940, NPS, 70.

³⁰⁷ Roosevelt was ill and did not deliver his address to Capitol Hill but instead had the text of his State of the Union address delivered to Congress. His State of the Union address he gave over the radio was more of a Fireside Chat and went over the main points of his address.

³⁰⁸ Cass Sunstein, *The Second Bill of Rights: FDR's Unfinished Revolution—And Why We Need it More than Ever* (New York: Basic Books, 2004) 1- Argues Roosevelt's address and larger emphasis on the four freedoms; freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want and freedom from

education, and adequate health care regardless of station; race or creed and Roosevelt insisted these rights were fundamental to the rights of citizenship. Blacks who heard his address believed the “Second Bill of Rights” guaranteed their access to the rights associated with full citizenship.

The demands of war triggered an influx of federal monies and movement of people into the state. People flooded into the Sacramento to work in war related industry jobs and needed inexpensive housing. However, the population of California accelerated even after the end of the war. Over the course of the twentieth century, California’s population crush revolutionized the economy of the state; yet, the state’s housing, transportation, health care, and social service infrastructures struggled to keep pace with the astronomical growth. The lack of adequate housing became a pressing problem for cities all throughout the state and the issue was compounded for blacks because of racial exclusionary policies.

The tremendous influx created an increasingly tight housing market in Sacramento. In addition, realtors continued to follow racial restrictions, which decreased the number of homes available to blacks. Realtors worked to keep blacks out of “white” Sacramento and housing developers refused to part with their racial exclusionary policies. During the war, incoming blacks found available housing in the West End. The West End was in Tract 7 of the city and the residents were migrant workers, Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans and blacks. Realtors steered blacks into the West End because the area was known as a minority neighborhood, but also because of the sudden availability of inexpensive housing. The internment of Japanese Americans left houses and apartments in the West End vacant

fear included the freedom from want and Roosevelt was not necessarily an egalitarian but wanted freedom.

and realtors benefitted from their misfortune and sold and rented these properties to newcomers.³⁰⁹

Several black newcomers took advantage of Japanese internment and purchased businesses from fleeing Japanese business owners. In 1942, Louise and Isaac Anderson and William Jackson purchased a liquor store from a Japanese owner and established the Zanzibar Club. The Zanzibar was a Jazz club where touring musicians such as Dizzy Gillespie, Count Basie, and Duke Ellington performed.³¹⁰ Two brothers, Alex and Hovey Moore purchased another establishment located across the street and opened the Mo-Mo Club that featured both singers and dancers. These Jazz Clubs served as an important social outlet for those working in the service industry and in the military. The West End became an overcrowded hub for blacks to both live and socialize. Vincent Theodore “Ted” Thompson moved to Sacramento from the Bronx with a dollar in his pocket. He found work at McClellan Air Force Base as an aircraft painter and lived in the West End. He also moonlit at the Zanzibar and the MoMo as a saxophonist, which helped him pay his way through mortuary school at San Francisco College of Mortuary Science.³¹¹ The success of the Zanzibar brought negative attention to the West End and rumors circulated about prostitution in the establishment. Based on rumors of prostitution, state liquor officials revoked their liquor license in 1949, which ultimately led to the effectively closing the club.

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³⁰⁹ Kevin Wildie, *Sacramento's Historic Japantown: Legacy of a Lost Neighborhood*, (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2013).

³¹⁰ William Burg, *Sacramento's K Street: Where Our City was Born* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2012), 102.

³¹¹ Robert Davila, “Pioneering Black Mortician Dies: Sacramento’s First African American Funeral Director Was Also a Gifted Jazz Saxophonist,” *Sacramento Bee*, July 7, 2006, 1, Wire Feed.

³¹² William Burg, *Sacramento's K Street: Where Our City was Born* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2012), 102.

Towards the end of World War II, the federal government realized millions of servicemen were returning home and they would need employment, housing and college training. The War Department was aware of the problems that plagued returning World War I veterans and crafted a program to help veterans' transition back into society. Passed in 1944, The Servicemen's Readjustment Act, otherwise known as the G.I. Bill, helped transform the lives of returning servicemen. The bill provided veterans with free college tuition, job training and placement, and home loans. The G.I. Bill, which some called the "magic carpet to the middle class," benefitted eight out of ten men born in the 1920's.³¹³ This was possible in large part because the bill included Veterans Administration (VA) mortgage insurance program, which allowed veterans to obtain home mortgages with very low down payments and low interest rates. The program had two primary objectives: to reward the service of veterans and to stimulate housing construction.³¹⁴ The program also stimulated housing development because it incentivized the housing industry, which led to a boom in suburban development. The nation experienced a tremendous growth in the numbers of homeowners where the rate increased from 43.6 percent in 1940 to 64 percent by 1980.³¹⁵ In California, veteran's mortgages accounted for more than half of the new home construction.³¹⁶

³¹³ Cleary and Levitan, *Old Wars Remain Unfinished* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1973).

³¹⁴ Edward Humes, *Over Here: How the G.I. Bill Transformed the American Dream* (New York: Harcourt, 2006) and Glenn Altschuler and Stuart Blumin, *The GI Bill: The New Deal for Veterans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³¹⁵ Greene and Watcher, "The American Mortgage," 97.

³¹⁶ Edward Humes, *Over Here: How the GI Bill Transformed the American Dream* (Orlando: Harcourt Books, 2006), 99.

Excluding Black Ownership

After the war, black veterans stayed in Sacramento because there were still plenty of permanent job opportunities in the three military installations, Mather, the Army Depot, and in the private defense firms like Aerojet and Douglas. In addition, Campbell's Soup opened a plant on Franklin Boulevard and hired hundreds of workers. Blacks who remained wanted better housing accommodations and tried to move outside of the West End into more ideal neighborhoods. Black veterans wanted to take advantage of the G.I. Bill's mortgage program and qualified for V.A. loans. However, realtors steered them into the West End and refused to show them homes in more desirable neighborhoods.³¹⁷ The G.I. Bill's promise of home ownership elevated many white low-income families into the middle class, but it failed to offer the same potential to black veterans. On paper, the bill appeared to be race neutral but the bill ensured states were in charge of the program. By leaving states in charge of the program, the G.I. Bill did not challenge local customs concerning race or push for equal access.³¹⁸

There were two features of the G.I. Bill that allowed for racial preference and made it tougher for blacks to secure the same benefits. The legislation gave veterans funds for college and allowed universities and colleges to follow their current admission's standards. They did not want to strip away authority from the schools; however, by not requiring changes to policies many black veterans were unable to use their college benefits. In the South many state colleges had "white- only" admissions policies that precluded black attendance. Southern schools argued blacks could use their college benefits at all black

³¹⁷ The West End became an ethnically and racially diverse community and included Blacks, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Italians, Portuguese, Latinos, East Indians and whites.

³¹⁸ Mettler, 267.

colleges and universities but in some states there were not enough to address the demands of blacks.³¹⁹ The second feature barring access to black veterans pertained to home ownership. The distribution of VA Loans followed the same guidelines set forth by the FHA, which included redlining. The G.I. Bill appeared to be open for everyone who had served but the bill was really “earmarked ‘For Whites Veterans Only.’”³²⁰ Thus, the G.I. Bill continued to increase the gap in homeownership rates between blacks and whites and in effect impacted their future economic success.

During the postwar era of prosperity, black residents continued to face discriminatory practices that excluded them from the suburbs. They found no matter how much money they had they could not purchase a home or even rent apartments in primarily white neighborhoods. These exclusionary practices coupled with redlining created dual consequences for minority home seekers and owners in Sacramento. Realtors still believed they were protecting property values, but this practice increased the racial divide between residential tracts. Not only were blacks unable to purchase homes because of redlining, but property owners in the West End also suffered from the policy. Redlining allowed realtors and banks to explicitly use race as a marker for determining property values and providing financial services. In 1938, the HOLC identified the West End as the area of the highest risk for lenders. This designation did not merely mean the minorities were steered into the neighborhood but also impacted home, business and apartment values in the West End.

³¹⁹ It should be noted black veterans did attend historically all black colleges and universities. There were also some veterans who attended colleges outside of the South but this process was more difficult.

³²⁰ Charles G. Bolte and Louis Harris, *Our Negro Veterans* (New York: Public Committee Affairs, Pamphlet #128, 1947), 20.

While surrounding neighborhoods experienced increases in property values, property values in the West End stagnated or fell.³²¹

The HOLC's designation of the West End as a high risk limited the economic growth and expansion of the neighborhood. The area developed into a rental market and failed to provide homeowners with the same amount of home equity as other areas of the city. As sociologist Hernandez has noted in his work on fair housing, "The redlining of the West End severely altered the property owners' ability to finance repairs and maintain their property."³²² Banks were unwilling to invest money into an area that might fail to generate the same sort of income. This process continued to decrease property values and confirmed white beliefs house values were connected to race. Through the discriminatory rating system, mortgage funds and financial resources that could have revitalized black areas were funneled away into safer financial neighborhoods.

When Canson began her search for a home, her husband was eligible for the housing benefits from the GI Bill because of his service in the military. She believed they were entitled to the benefits of the GI Bill and the Federal Housing Authorities low interest loans. They could afford to purchase a home in any of the middle-class neighborhoods but due to banking practices and racially restrictive covenants they were continually denied. Canson recollected, "the realtor would say one thing over the phone and then say something different when we showed up."³²³ White realtors, housing developers, banks, and homeowners seemed to all work together in order to maintain racially separated housing

³²¹ Jesus Hernandez, "Connecting Segregation to Contemporary Housing Credit Practices and Foreclosures: A Case Study of Sacramento," Written Testimony Submitted to the National Commission on Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity, Los Angeles Hearing, September 9, 2008.

³²² Ibid.

³²³ Elizabeth Fernandez, "Virna Canson: Fighting Fire with Fire", *The Crisis* 90 (June/July 1983): 278.

and communities. However, blacks that served in the military were optimistic about the benefits of the GI Bill and believed their entrance back into “mainstream” life would be better because of their service. These veterans had traveled and seen the world, and in some countries they were treated with dignity and respect.³²⁴ They were empowered by these experiences and anticipated their service to their country would translate into more freedoms for them. In other instances black soldiers endured extreme discrimination but their wartime experiences helped to reshape their perspective on race and citizenship in America where they were determined to push for more.³²⁵

In the 1940s, Sacramento struggled to provide enough housing because of the sudden increase in population. Public housing became a critical need and the Works Public Administration built New Helvetia Housing for low-income residents. However, the United States entrance into the war transferred New Helvetia from low-income housing into housing for defense workers.³²⁶ After the war, New Helvetia was turned back into low-income housing. New Helvetia filled up quickly and Sacramento needed more public housing. In the 1950s, developers built River Oaks and it was much larger, holding nearly 2,000 residents.³²⁷ The Sacramento Public Housing Authority (SPHA) oversaw the building

³²⁴ For more on Black Soldiers and their involvement in World War II: Graham Smith, *When Jim Crow Met John Bull: Black American Soldiers in World War II Britain* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 1987); Charles Sasser, *Patton's Panthers: The African American 761st Tank Battalion in World II* (New York: Pocket Books, 2005) and Christopher Moore, *Fighting for America: Black Soldiers-The Unsung Heroes of World War II* (New York: One World/Ballantine, 2007).

³²⁵ An important work focusing on the shift between soldier's service in the military during WWII and their political activism after the war is Robert Jefferson, *Fighting for Hope: African American Troops of the 93rd Infantry Division in World War II and Postwar America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

³²⁶ William Burg, *Sacramento Renaissance: Art, Music and Activism in California's Capitol City* (Charleston, NC: The History Press, 2013), 37.

³²⁷ These numbers were put together by the Sacramento Police Department in 1996 as part of an assessment of gang and drug violence, the report was entitled, “New Helvetian and River Oaks

process and assigned residents to units. The Housing Authority consisted of five members appointed to their positions by the city council. However, the SPHA operated as a separate unit outside of the city council and they implemented the guidelines for tenant policy. River Oaks housing was open to any resident, regardless of race, which qualified for low-income housing. However, SPHA implemented segregation in River Oaks and placed all blacks into one section. This practice was common in public housing in the 1940s because commissioners believed the integration of the races within public housing would lead to violence.

When Nathaniel Colley moved into Sacramento he and his wife attempted to buy a house in the suburbs but continually ran into roadblocks, which prevented them from purchasing a home. They had a similar experience to Canson, where real estate agents refused to sell or show them any house and when they thought they found a house they could not get a loan. They ended up purchasing a land lot in Land Park, but used a white couple to purchase the lot for them. When they moved into their home in 1955 they found a burning cross at their front door.³²⁸ Colley was alarmed by the amount of discriminatory practices they faced and like Canson wanted to address these issues. In 1952, he and Canson investigated public housing in Sacramento and discovered blacks were segregated into two buildings. He wrote about this discovery in his column, "One Man's Opinion": "The average white applicant for such housing has had to wait for three to six months for assignment to New Helvetia, while the average Negro applicant has been required to wait

Project: Combatting Gangs and Drugs with Partnerships in Housing Projects," Sacramento Police Department, 1996.

³²⁸ Colley Interview, 19.

for two to four years for assignment. Of the 310 units there, 16 have been set aside for Negroes.”³²⁹

They were concerned with the prevalence of de facto segregation in public housing and approached the Housing Authority about the issue. Black Sacramentans were not the only individuals who were alarmed about segregation in housing. When they uncovered discrimination in public housing they also discovered a larger community of whites, Mexican Americans, Japanese Americans and others ready to challenge the SHA. Several labor unions and organizations supported the NAACP’s effort to desegregate public housing. Twenty different organizations such as churches, political groups, charities and labor unions came together and formed the Sacramento Committee against Segregation in Public Housing Committee (Sacramento Committee). Each organization elected delegates who became the backbone of the Sacramento Committee. For example, the Women’s Council of Sacramento assembled a separate committee that studied black segregation in the housing project. Mrs. H. H. Johnson, Chairman, assisted by Mrs. Gerald Rifkin and Mrs. May Viau put their information together and provided valuable information that the committee used to present the issue to the community and the Housing Authority.³³⁰

The effort to end segregation in public housing became a larger community effort, but a strong leadership led the Sacramento Committee. The committee consisted of Myra West, the chairwoman, Colley, who served as chief counsel, Dr. L. Sylvester Odom, the pastor of St. Andrew’s AME and the NAACP president, and Canson. West was a white woman, who lived in Carmichael a town fifteen miles outside of Sacramento. However, she

³²⁹ Nathaniel S. Colley, “One Man’s Opinion,” *Sacramento Outlook*; Nathaniel S. and Jerlean J. Colley Papers, Series 8, 4:5, Center for Sacramento History.

³³⁰ A Silhouette off Service, *Sacramento Woman’s Council* (Sacramento: New Publishing Company, 1955), 47-50.

joined the NAACP after she heard the NAACP's West Coast Director, Franklin H.

Williams speak at the Unitarian Church. She became a member the organization because she believed in equality and she was disturbed discrimination occurred in California.

On January 3, 1952, West and Colley met with the City Manager, Bartley W. Cavanaugh and presented their findings and asked for the desegregation of public housing. Cavanaugh listened to their request but he questioned Myra's involvement with the committee. He asked her why the River Oaks Project was her concern. She responded, "I don't approve of segregation." Unsatisfied with this answer, he continued to press the issue and said, "But you live in Carmichael." She quickly replied, "I don't approve of segregation in Mississippi either."³³¹ He never implicitly asked her why a white woman was involved with the committee but his questions towards her suggested that he was confused why a white woman of means was troubled about segregation in public housing. However, Cavanaugh assured West and Colley that he did not tolerate racial segregation either but the matter was out of his hands because he held no authority over the housing projects. The housing projects were housed under the city government, but they were built and operated by a group of five commissioners who were granted complete autonomy. Cavanaugh pointed out the city council selected the housing commissioners but the City Council did not interact with their daily operations. The meeting showed the unwillingness of the City Council to get involved and it was clear Cavanaugh wanted to separate the City Council from the actions of the Housing Authority.³³²

³³¹ William Mayer, "Sacramento's Fight for Integration in Public Housing," *The Crises*, 60:1 (January 1953): 26, 67.

³³² Mayer, "Sacramento's Fight for Integration in Public Housing," 29.

The Sacramento Committee arranged a meeting with the commissioners of the Housing Authority. The commissioners willingly met with the committee but they were flabbergasted by the charges of segregation in public housing. They believed they fell within the parameters of the laws because they permitted blacks into public housing. They also claimed they were unaware of any policy that placed separated black residents into certain units. However, they ascertained that even if the practice occurred they assumed people were “more comfortable with their own kind.”³³³ The commissioners promised to address the situation before they placed any additional families into River Oaks. They also promised to notify West by mail with their solution. She never received a letter and when they inquired about the letter the commissioners responded that they decided not to make any changes. West threatened to sue the Housing Authority unless they changed their policies and Albert Becker, the Housing Authority’s executive director, laughed at her threat and said, “There isn’t anything you can do in the court. Legally you people haven’t a leg to stand on.”³³⁴

West submitted a resolution to the City Council on January 3, 1952 requesting support to eliminate segregation and to open up more units for blacks in New Helvetia.³³⁵ Three days later the committee met at St. Andrews and agreed they should only file a suit as a last resort. They decided to increase community pressure on the Housing Authority. During the next few weeks West and Canson, who was now secretary of the committee, toiled night and day to galvanize the community. They drew up an outline of the main points of the housing fight and sent it to other organizations that might also apply pressure

³³³ Ibid, 29.

³³⁴ Ibid, 67.

³³⁵ “City will Probe Housing Discrimination Charge,” *The Sacramento Bee*, January 4, 1952, 17.

to the commissioners. They approached public officials and civic leaders and asked for support. By the middle of January, there was little response and the committee decided to move ahead with a lawsuit. Becker responded to the threat and told the committee 56 of the 114 units that were going to be ready on the first of February was designated for blacks. He noted that this was 18% of the entire 400 units they had and by law they were only required to reserve 13.7% of the units for minorities.

Canson did not want to lose the momentum and the community support they had garnered and she searched for individuals who were about to move into River Oaks. She wanted to test the Housing Authority's policies and have these new residents agree to challenge the Housing Authority in a court of law. She found three willing participants, Willie Franklin, Marion Reynolds and Norma Johnson and helped guide them through the process of filing the complaint with Colley. The Housing Authority reacted to the threat of legal action their attorney, William P. Dwyer, asked the Sacramento Committee to hold off on filing suit until the commissioners met. The commissioners met and voted to integrate River Oaks and the Sacramento Committee was relieved. However, Canson who was now the head of the Sacramento Committee questioned whether or not the commission was using a stalling tactic and would not implement integration until all of the black residents had moved in.³³⁶

Canson was correct in doubting the SHA's commitment to integrating River Oaks. The Housing Authority asked current black tenants to voluntarily move into another unit in order to achieve integration. Several tenants complied with the request and volunteered to move. These tenants expected assistance from the Housing Authority with their move, but

³³⁶ Myra had moved outside of the state and Virna took over her position as chairwoman of the committee.

the SPHA refused to help them in any way. Several of the residents requested usage one of the Authority's two trucks to help larger items, but they were informed the commission no longer owned trucks. In addition, they had trouble moving into their new units because the housing authority failed to distribute new keys or provide the exact location of their new apartment. After the residents voluntarily moved they noticed an odd pattern in the location of their new apartments. The housing authority moved black residents from one building to another and placed them in units next to other black families. In addition, the housing authority appeared to expand the scope of segregation and "integrated" blacks into buildings with Mexican, Chinese, Japanese residents, but no white families. Elmo McWilliams, one of the tenants who voluntarily moved stated, " This isn't what I thought of as integration."³³⁷ The integrated portion of the complex still contained no white families. The SPHA claimed they arbitrarily assigned units to accomplish integration. Canson did not accept their claim and demanded an explanation for the random pattern of integration. She argued they could not claim integration because tenants of color were still separated from whites. Commissioner Becker responded to Canson and suggested the units were integrated because they included people of all races, and that Mexicans were Caucasians.³³⁸

Canson was outraged and pressed the NAACP to submit a suit against the housing authority. Colley filed on behalf of the NAACP and the court ruled in favor of the NAACP and stated such segregation was not legal in public housing projects. After the case was won, some residents of River Oaks were dubious about the impact of integration. They did not think that integration was achieved by moving to other units and moving was more

³³⁷ William Mayer, "Sacramento's Fight for Integration in Public Housing," *The Crises*, January 1953, Vol 60, No. 1, 26-33, 67.

³³⁸ Ibid.

trouble than it was worth. However, other residents saw a difference within the housing projects. Marion Reynolds had noted before the change there were racial fights between the children but since integration kids were playing together.³³⁹

After the Sacramento Committee opened the doors of public housing they turned their attention to generating more employment opportunities for the lower classes. The Sacramento NAACP created a Labor and Industry Committee dedicated to investigating complaints of discrimination in employment. In 1955, Canson served as chairwomen of the Labor and Industry Committee and she realized the techniques they used to open public housing would work in opening employment doors for the lower classes. At the beginning of 1955, she received several complaints from black Sacramentans who charged Campbell's Soup Company discriminated against blacks because they refused to hire black applicants. Canson investigated the complaints and decided the committee should meet and conduct a larger investigation of the hiring practices of Campbell's. She reached out to the larger community and asked for help from several officials from the Cannery Workers Local, #857, AFL (Local 857). On January 24, 1955 she and three members of the Labor and Industry Committee met with officials from the Local 857, AFL to determine if Campbell's was discriminating against blacks. They discovered that out of the 1,700 employees working in the Sacramento location of Campbell's there were no blacks and the company did not show any preference to hiring card-carrying union members. The Local 857 recommended the NAACP Committee provide written statements from people who had

³³⁹ Ibid, 65.

attempted to apply for work within the company, particularly those within the last six months.³⁴⁰

On the second of February, the officials of the Local 857 brought the matter to the attention of the management of the Campbell's. The company claimed they did not participate in discrimination in employment and objected to the Local's claims. After the meeting, Canson requested a written statement detailing the meeting from the Local 857 so they could confront the company. However, within a few weeks of the meeting with Campbell's, Canson received word the company had hired two black workers, Vesta Adams and Jeff Jefferson. One was hired as a packer and the second was hired on the third shift with the cleanup equipment crew. Campbell's thoroughly screened both applicants who were already union members with experience. When they were hired the company did not indicate they were being hired because they had failed to hire blacks in the past. In addition, Campbell's reached out to the NAACP and asked for assistance in sending more prospective employees.³⁴¹ Canson contacted both workers and found they were both with their jobs and within two weeks the company employed two more black applicants. Over the course of the year, Campbell's continued to hire blacks and the committee had a good repore with the company. The committee successfully opened the doors of employment at Campbell's and they were heartened by the community's continual support.³⁴²

The Sacramento NAACP believed the victories in both public housing and with Campbell's signaled a change in the racial climate of Sacramento. They decided to build upon the momentum of these two victories and turned their attention to dismantling

³⁴⁰ Virna Canson, "Report of the Labor and Industry Committee," February 24, 1955, Box 43, Folder 29, NAACP-WC.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² Canson, "Report of the Labor and Industry Committee."

exclusionary practices in the private housing sector. The court victory in public housing only covered a small portion of the housing issue and black Sacramentans wanted to have full access to all housing. In 1948, the Supreme Court outlawed racially restrictive covenants in *Shelley vs. Kraemer*. The court ruled racial covenants violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. Yet, there were loopholes in the *Shelley* decision and people discovered ways to keep racial covenants in title documents. The court's decision did not prevent the use of race as a determining factor for mortgage credit.³⁴³ In addition, larger societal fears that nonwhites caused serious deprecation of existing property values still guided housing developers, realtors and mortgage practices in the housing market.³⁴⁴

In order to test discrimination in private housing sector, the NAACP needed an individual who qualified for an FHA/VA loan and was willing to endure the process of facing large land developers. On January 15 1954, Oliver Ming went to Highland Park, a new subdivision in Sacramento to purchase a home. Ming was a veteran of World War II and he was eligible for FHA/VA financing. In addition he met the financial criteria required to buy a home. However, the housing developers of Highland Park refused to sell Ming a home because he was black. Ming was incredibly frustrated because this was not the first time he attempted to purchase a home for his family in Sacramento. In his previous attempts home housing developers and brokers also refused to sell to him because he was black, in some instances they refused to allow Ming into the neighborhood. On one occasion, Ming attempted to plead with a realtor for a chance to purchase a home and the

³⁴³ Richard R.W. Brooks and Carol M. Rose, *Saving the Neighborhoods: Racially Restrictive Covenants, Law, and Social Norms* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2013), 3

³⁴⁴ Robert Weaver, *The Negro Ghetto* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948), 214.

realtor told Ming to not give him “any patriotic bunk.”³⁴⁵ Ming could not handle the outright discrimination he endured and approached the NAACP about filing suit against the developers.

The NAACP-WC took his case and attorneys Loren Miller from Los Angeles and Nathaniel Colley represented the case.³⁴⁶ The NAACP believed the *Ming* case was the model case for dismantling black exclusion from the private housing sector. His case highlighted the contradictions between the private right of an owner or developer prohibiting the sale of a home on the basis of race and the federal government’s responsibility to see that companies using governmental monies followed federal mandates. Both Miller and Colley had serious reservations about whether or not private builders could lawfully refuse housing created with direct or indirect support from federal funds. They reasoned that since the companies were receiving federal benefit it was the company’s obligation then to provide housing facilities without discrimination on the basis of race, color or creed.³⁴⁷

Ming was the perfect case to test this policy because builders, contractors, and realtors explicitly denied him the right to purchase houses they controlled in Sacramento County because of his race.³⁴⁸ They argued that the federal government could not lawfully discriminate against individuals on the basis of race, ethnicity, or religion. Therefore, individuals who utilized government aid had to follow the same guidelines.³⁴⁹ They

³⁴⁵ “Negroes Charge Discrimination Among Realtors,” *Press-Courier*, January 17 1957, 11.

³⁴⁶ *Ming v. Horgan*, Super. Ct., Sacramento Co., Calif., No. 97130 (1958).

³⁴⁷ Nathaniel Sextus Colley Interview conducted by Clarence Caesar, Sacramento Ethnic Communities Survey-Black Oral Histories, 1983/146, March 2, 1984, Center for Sacramento History.

³⁴⁸ “Briefing the News: Ruling by June 13 in Calif. Housing Case,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 19, 1955, A1.

³⁴⁹ “What are the Branches Doing,” *The Crisis*, 65:7 (August-September 1958): 416

accused builders, contractors and realtors operating in Sacramento County with a conspiracy to deprive Ming of his rights under the National Housing Act.³⁵⁰ The builders utilized funding from the FHA and VA financing were obligated to abide by the federal governments umbrella of equal rights.

Witnesses were a key component in the *Ming* case. There were numerous blacks that experienced discrimination when attempting to purchase a home, but they needed individuals willing to testify in court. This is where Canson played a critical role; she identified other witnesses that testified in court about their own housing experiences. The developers argued that government mortgage guarantees did not deny them the right to limit their right of selling a home on the private market. Realtors who testified denied they practiced racial discrimination in the sale of homes because they were following the practices set forward by NAREB. Judge James H. Oakley ruled that the developers, owners, builders and real estate against had all actively and willing denied the purchase of homes by blacks.³⁵¹ He ruled that entities receiving public monies had to follow the federal government's guidelines of nondiscrimination. In his Memorandum Opinion, he stated: "Congress must have intended the supplying of housing for all citizens, not just Caucasians - and on an equal, not a segregated basis. If the courts were to hold otherwise... the constitutional guaranties of equal protection and non-discrimination would be accorded only secondary importance..."³⁵² It was the first case in America that stated that the mere

³⁵⁰ "Racial Discrimination Suit Taken by Judge," *Sacramento Bee*, May 10, 1955, 1.

³⁵¹ *Ming v. Horgan*, Super. Ct., Sacramento Co., Calif., No. 97130 (1958).

³⁵² National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Annual Report for 1958, July 1959, (New York) 20.

receipt of public funds made it mandatory that there be no discrimination in the sale of homes.³⁵³

The *Ming* case was celebrated as a triumph for housing throughout the state. However, the *Ming* decision did not open the doors for non-whites to purchase homes. Despite the *Ming* decision, whites still prevented the sale of homes to non-whites. They clung to their private right of ownership and tried to evade the state's incursion into their perceived right to control the sale of their property. The South Park Hills subdivision refused to open up housing to blacks and Sacramento Committee organized a three month long protest outside of development.³⁵⁴ The protests organized by Canson drew the attention of the State Attorney who investigated discrimination in subdivisions.³⁵⁵ Attorney General Mosk was an advocate for ending housing discrimination. Mosk called housing discrimination the most important civil rights problem in California and commented, "Until every citizen of California can buy a home in any are he can afford, we shall not conquer other forms of discrimination."³⁵⁶ He confronted the issue head and demanded that the subdivision be opened up to every citizen. Housing discrimination and cases occurred all throughout the state in the 1950s and brought attention to the issue. However, the activities in Sacramento were critical because of their location in the state's capitol. The Sacramento Committee used their location as leverage for highlighting the issue and applied pressure to legislatures.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Golden State appeared to be at the forefront of racial liberalism when it began to dismantle Jim Crow laws in the areas of education,

³⁵³ Ibid, 2

³⁵⁴ "Race Discriminations in Housing Probed," *The Sacramento Union*, September 21, 1962.

³⁵⁵ "Mosk is Checking Housing Discrimination in Capital," *The Sacramento Bee*, September 20, 1962.

³⁵⁶ "Mosk Declares Discrimination Intolerable," *Sacramento Bee*, July 17, 1962, 1.

housing, and employment. The state government embraced a civil right's agenda, fueled by the 1959 governor's election that placed Democrat, Edmund (Pat) Brown into office.

According to historian Mark Brilliant, when Brown became governor "the question was no longer if or when civil rights legislation would be enacted in California, but what shape legislation would take."³⁵⁷ Several key black players were in office, but Brown's governorship paved the way for the passage of numerous acts, laws, and propositions that created a legal environment free from racial restrictions.

During his tenure, the Golden State, passed the Unruh Civil Rights Act in 1959, a piece of legislation created by Assemblyman Jesse Marvin Unruh and NAACP lawyer Nathaniel Colley, which gave all citizens with the state full and equal accommodations in regardless of their "race, color, religion, ancestry, or national origin" this sweeping piece of legislation.³⁵⁸ In addition, two important open housing acts, Hawkins Fair Housing Act and the Rumford Fair Housing Law, and the California Fair Employment Act put California at the forefront of the civil rights movement and gave blacks, Mexican Americans, Japanese Americans, Native Americans and Chinese Americans greater access in housing and employment.

However, the benefits of the G.I. Bill allowed millions of white Americans to establish home equity and a financial basis that allowed for generational wealth. The postwar economy flourished throughout the nation and the principle beneficiaries of that boom were whites. The wealth gap between whites and blacks increased in this booming economy because of the egregious differences in housing and education. The problems

³⁵⁷ Brilliant, *The Color of America has Changed*, 157.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 162.

associated with not being able to purchase a home in their desired home led to a stagnation of economic advancements. Regardless of their socioeconomic status, they could not access same housing options as white Americans. In addition, neighborhoods found covert ways to keep restrictions in place. Homeowner's Associations cropped up and operated as their own private governments, which effectively stalled the creation of racially diverse communities.³⁵⁹ Homeowners also turned to sublegal techniques to discourage African Americans from buying houses in white neighborhoods, which included claiming the house had been sold, overpricing houses, or insisting the listings were incorrect.³⁶⁰

³⁵⁹ Evan McKenzie, *Privatopia: Homeowners Associations and the Rise of Residential Private Government* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) addresses this phenomenon in his sixth chapter where he traces the reasons behind the emergence of Homeowner's Associations.

³⁶⁰ Brilliant, *The Color of America has Changed*, 172.

Chapter 5

“Creating Economic Freedom”

“As long as most of us, the masses, have to pay high, high rates of interest, when we borrow money, and as long as we cannot see the importance of owning and controlling our source of credit, we cannot really make the very fundamental economic decision which affect all phases of our life. “

-Virna Canson³⁶¹

When Canson attended Tuskegee she majored in home economics, which was a vigorous degree that incorporated scientific training with the professionalization of housework and economics. She chose this degree because she wanted to become a home demonstration agent for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. As a demonstration agent she could travel the country helping families manage their money, teach women leadership skills and assist families with the maintenance of their homes.³⁶² Her choice of home economics coincided with the ideal of racial uplift that she was raised with in Oklahoma. Even though Canson did not complete her degree, the training she received at Tuskegee coupled by her upbringing shaped the path she took as an activist. She was concerned with improving the everyday lives of black families in Sacramento and wanted to build a stronger economic base for the black community. Housing was one avenue for the creation of a financial basis for blacks and through her work on the Sacramento Committee she discovered housing discrimination in both the private and public sector. The passage of fair housing acts should have opened the doors for people to purchase homes; however, housing

³⁶¹ Sacramento Credit Union Newsletter, 1.

³⁶² Canson, “Waging the War,” 20. It should be noted that the home economics was a vigorous degree, which was more than the professionalization of housework but incorporated scientific training and required students to master economics as well. For an excellent overview of the importance of home economics please see; Sarah Stage and Virginia B. Vincenti, eds., *Rethinking Home Economics: Women and the History of a Profession* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1997) and Megan J. Elias, *Stir it Up: Home Economics in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

was only one facet in achieving economic advancement. Canson realized there were larger economic barriers facing blacks and believed the fight for racial equality included the economic equality.

By the 1950s, Sacramento had a core of black professionals that were dedicated to the fight for black freedom. They experienced some success in dismantling overt barriers, but deeper institutional structures of racial injustices proved more to tackle. At this time, the Sacramento Committee and black professional leaders worked together and used legal avenues to open access to housing. This allowed for some people to purchase homes, but there were still economic roadblocks prohibiting blacks from achieving full economic freedom. In the postwar years, locals continued to face discriminatory practices. However, they looked for solutions outside of white controlled institutions and utilized resources within their community to overcome these issues. Race leaders diligently worked together and uncovered exclusionary practices in Sacramento and in doing so they were engaged in a movement to construct *their* California dream. Outside of the church and larger organizations, historical accounts of the black freedom struggle do not pay enough attention to how black communities continued to create their own institutions.³⁶³ Works focus on how black communities pushed for inclusion on white terms not on how blacks created and sustained their communities on their own terms.

The G.I. Bill created generational wealth for millions of white Americans but even after the passage of fair housing in California, blacks were years behind in reaping the benefits of the bill. Court cases and legislation opened housing, but another area of concern

³⁶³ This work does not seek to discredit the power of the church in the Civil Rights Movement but seeks to expand our historical knowledge of the Black economic infrastructures that assisted in the establishment of civil rights.

was access to lines of credit. Blacks had difficulty accessing financial services and credit, which hampered their economic development. For years blacks were denied credit because exclusionary practices limited access to credit to whites. In addition, blacks found themselves more susceptible to questionable banking practices. When banks and stores offered lines of credit to black customers they used a different set of interest rates and payment plans, which took advantage of their precarious economic position. These institutions deemed blacks as a financial risk and charged significantly higher interest rates on both payment and installment plans. They justified these practices because they were applying the same basic principles of redlining in housing to other banking practices. In Sacramento, the banks openly practiced institutional discrimination against blacks because they viewed black customers as a higher financial risk. Banks argued that they utilized financial considerations to determine access to loans, but blacks found regardless of their income levels the banking system remained a vanguard for whites.

The persistence of racist practices formed a perpetual wealth gap between whites and blacks and community leaders sought to dismantle these economic barriers. Canson and others leaders employed a multifaceted approach to address the economic problems they faced. They used the legal world to their benefit and pushed state legislatures as much as they could, but they also understood they needed to establish their own institutions to address economic inequality. Some leaders posited economic empowerment was only possible by placing economic power directly within the hands of blacks. They thought black owned and operated credit unions could reduce income inequality and poverty,

because small-scale credit opportunities could increase income and savings for borrowers.³⁶⁴

Given these limitations, Canson realized early in her career the power credit unions could have for becoming an economic vehicle for the black community. Canson led the way in establishing credit unions all throughout the state and was a leader of the Credit Union Movement within the NAACP.³⁶⁵ The NAACP Credit Union Movement emerged because of the continuation of racism, which forced blacks to take an “economic detour” and focus on business development within the community.³⁶⁶ Credit unions appealed to the black community because they provided blacks with economic power and members guided and controlled their own resources. The Credit Union Movement also demonstrates how there was no one set of tools or single strategy used to resolve discrimination. Canson also realized the potential of the NAACP credit union had to become more than just a bank and envisioned people using the credit union as a base where they received economic training as well.³⁶⁷ Following in the footsteps of the larger initiative of the NAACP, the NAACP Credit Unions provided an economic source of freedom much in the same way the NAACP provided a program for securing the rights for all.³⁶⁸

³⁶⁴ Mehrsa Baradaran, “How the Poor Got Cut Out of Banking,” *University of Georgia Law*, (January 2013), 4.

³⁶⁵ The concept of black owned banks started in the 1850s and continued because of the mistrust of white banks. Several important works on black banks are Lila Ammons, “The Evolution of Black-Owned Banks in the United States Between the 1880s and 1990s,” *Journal of Black Studies* 26:4 (March 1996), 467-489; and John Sibley Butler, *Entrepreneurship and Self-Help Among Black America: A Reconsideration of Race and Economics* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2006).

³⁶⁶ Melvin Oliver, Thomas Shapiro, *Black Wealth/White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Equality*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 47.

³⁶⁷ Virna Canson, “Waging the War,” 19.

³⁶⁸ “Know Your Credit Union,” Pamphlet, Box 3, Folder 24, NAACP-WC.

The Beginnings of Economic Freedom

In 1945, before Canson moved to Sacramento, several churches worked together and started a small church run credit union. Reverend D. D. Mattocks was the manager of the credit union and after a few years he realized the potential the credit union could have for the entire black community. He knew blacks could not get loans and credit from white-operated banks in Sacramento and few blacks trusted banks because of years of discriminatory practices. Mattocks had an extensive background as a community leader; he was as a minister at the Kyle's Temple A.M.E. and was a well-respected member of the community. When he moved to Sacramento, he brought with him years of community building experience. He had worked in Los Angeles as an agent for the well-regarded Golden State Mutual Insurance Company. Golden State Mutual, founded by William Nickerson, Jr., George Beavers, Jr., and Norman Houston, was the largest black owned insurance company in the West. The company followed a model of supporting race enterprises that focused on the philosophy "take care of your own."³⁶⁹ Golden State provided members with the full benefits of life insurance and gave millions of dollars in loans to the growing middle class black community. Reverend Mattocks witnessed the impact Golden State had on the development of the black community in Los Angeles and wanted to replicate the model in Sacramento.

Mattocks blended the guiding principles of the credit union with the NAACP and expanded the availability of credit to the larger black Sacramentan community. In 1949, Reverend D. D. Mattocks asked for authorization from the national branch of the NAACP to establish the first officially recognized NAACP credit union. When Mattocks presented

³⁶⁹ Josh Kun and Laura Pulido, *Black and Brown in Los Angeles: Beyond Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 71.

his request there were other credit unions run by local NAACP branches, but none of these were linked together in a formal structure or recognized by the national branch. Each of the branches operated independently and Mattocks understood in order for economic success the branches needed to unite together under the singular umbrella of the national branch. The national branch approved his request and Mattocks created the very first official NAACP Credit Union.³⁷⁰

The Sacramento NAACP Credit Union opened its doors in 1947 as a “closed” credit union that only serviced members of the NAACP. Due to his experience as minister of the Kyle’s Temple A.M.E. Zion Church and a former agent for Golden State Mutual Insurance Company, Mattocks had extensive connections within the community that enabled him to sign up members to the NAACP Credit Union.³⁷¹ The credit union initially started with thirty members and grew slowly over the next few years. Mattocks served as Treasurer of the Sacramento branch of the NAACP Credit Union from March 1949, the month of its incorporation, until December 1953 when he unexpectedly fell ill and passed away. However, his dream of providing economic opportunities for black Sacramentans did not perish with him but flourished under Canson’s leadership.

After his sudden passing, Canson was named the Treasurer-Manager of the credit union. Canson was not a newcomer to the credit union; she had already served as several years as the manager of the credit union.³⁷² This experience helped tremendously, but Canson had a long road ahead of her to make the credit union financially viable. When Canson took over as the Treasurer-Manager the credit union had grown very little from when it opened its

³⁷⁰ Canson, “Waging the War,” 15.

³⁷¹ Ibid, 2.

³⁷² Fernandez, “Virna Canson: Fighting Fire with Fire,” 287.

doors. Under Mattocks, membership numbers plateaued and there were still only thirty members and the branch had \$72.00 in assets.³⁷³ Despite the glacial growth of the credit union, Canson believed in Mattocks' founding message, "the community needed to pool its own resources and control their own source of low cost credit."³⁷⁴ She knew the credit union was capable of recruiting more members and that the union could provide the economic basis of the black Sacramentan community.³⁷⁵

She also recognized the potential credit unions could have in generating economic growth for the entire black community. Canson envisioned that the NAACP Credit Union could serve as an educational center where members could get economic training and advice.³⁷⁶ She resolved to transform the credit union from a small fledging credit union into a financial powerhouse. She served in this position from 1954-1965 and during her tenure the NAACP Credit Unions grew at an astounding rate. Not only did the Sacramento branch flourish, but Canson also started a larger credit union movement within the NAACP.³⁷⁷

Expansion of the Credit Union Movement

The NAACP Credit Union Movement that emerged was part of a larger movement in the United States where minority groups launched their own banking institutions. Historically, credit associations were created to address the lack of credit opportunities for the working and lower classes. The first credit unions began in Germany in response to a crop failure and famine in 1846, which left farmers destitute. At this time, there were no governmental assistance programs to help farmers. In the absence of these programs,

³⁷³ Letter from Virna Canson to Charles M. Rossie Jr, Box 43, Folder 34, NAACP-WC.

³⁷⁴ Sacramento Branch NAACP Newsletter, Box 7, Folder 5, NAACP-WC.

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

several landowners united together and established a rural cooperative, which offered lines of credit to get farmers back on their feet and restore the region's economic activity.³⁷⁸

Rural cooperatives, which focused on cooperative help and community involvement, became the basis for credit unions. This institutional model appealed to others in the working and lower classes and credit unions appeared throughout Europe.

By the early 1900s, credit unions were found in immigrant communities in America in the larger cities of New York and Boston. Before credit unions the most common source of credit in the nation came from credit pawnbrokers, also known as loan sharks. Loan sharks were uncouth businessmen who charged exorbitant interest rates and repeatedly took advantage of the financial position in the lower classes.³⁷⁹ Loan sharks were not regulated by local or state government, which left borrowers in vulnerable positions without any legal recourse. Immigrants who had very little economic resources repeatedly fell victim to loan sharks, because there were no other options available. Credit unions delivered a safer and cheaper option of credit for the lower classes. The early founders of the U.S. Credit Unions offered an alternative to installment credit with high interest rates. They also considered credit unionism as a type of economic reform capable of pulling the poor up into economic mainstream because they supplied their basic needs-credit. The founders emphasized democratic control and stressed member's participation in the credit union because their true goal was "economic democracy" through self-help.³⁸⁰ The goals of the credit union were not based on a business model of creating profits, but focused on providing the lowest

³⁷⁸ Ian MacPherson, *Hands Around the Globe: A History of the International Credit Union Movement* (Victoria, B.C.: TouchWood Editions, 2010).

³⁷⁹ J. Carroll Moody and Gilbert C. Fite, *The Credit Union Movement: Origins and Development, 1850-1970* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), 39.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 35.

possible interest rates for credit to low- income groups.³⁸¹ Credit unions became the first financial institutions designed to provide working class people with reasonably priced credit and a safe repository for their savings.³⁸²

By the 1920s and 1930s, the credit unions moved beyond the East Coast and appeared in many of the western states by the late 1930s and early 1940s.³⁸³ The Credit Union Movement blended beautifully with the economic philosophies of several prominent black leaders. Historian Juliet Walker wrote in her work on black businesses, “The economic thought of both Du Bois and Washington coalesced in the founding of black banks and insurance companies...both men believed that cooperative efforts were essential for the expansion of black economic life.”³⁸⁴ Black banks were organized during the Reconstruction era and were organized by mutual aid societies, secret organizations, and churches.³⁸⁵ These banks provided the capital basis for black businesses and offered loans and other banking services. By 1912, there were sixty-four black banks in the country, most of these were located in the South, and five were in Oklahoma’s all-black towns.³⁸⁶ As black banks grew they invested monies in fraternal societies, churches and projects that benefitted the black community. However, the black banking industry suffered during the Great Depression and credit unions invested more conservatively in the black community.

³⁸¹ Moody and Fite, *The Credit Union Movement*, 40.

³⁸² Mark Flannery, *An Economic Evaluation of Credit Unions in the United States* (Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, 1974), 3.

³⁸³ *Ibid*, 39.

³⁸⁴ Juliet Walker, *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship*, 2nd Ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 187.

³⁸⁵ Ammons, “Evolution of Black-Owned Banks in the United States Between the 1880s and 1990s,” 468.

³⁸⁶ Walker, *The History of Black Business in America*, 191.

In addition their assets were tied within the economic capability of their members and when members defaulted on loans they were left with property worth little.³⁸⁷

The institutional structure of the credit union fit nicely within the black banking institution model of community involvement and ownership, which supported black economic development. Credit unions attracted community and church leaders because they were member owned and required active participation by members through committee work. Participation and ownership in the bank was significant because historically clientele were prevented from positions of management.³⁸⁸ By the late 1940s, the Credit Union Movement reached California and several community branches opened. Mattocks hoped the credit union would lead to economic freedoms, but he probably never envisioned the path Canson would take to expand the Sacramento branch and other credit union branches in California.

Following in the footsteps of the larger agenda of the NAACP, she proposed that the NAACP Credit Union could provide a source of economic freedom much in the same way that the NAACP provided a program for securing the rights for all.³⁸⁹ Canson was frustrated by discriminatory and exclusionary practices but she was determined to unite the community she wrote, “We want better jobs and we are not qualified and we want better homes but we can’t get them because we don’t have enough money. It thus becomes very important that we make the most of what we do have.”³⁹⁰ She also incorporated Edward Filene’s vision for credit unions and often used quotes from him in her memorandums to

³⁸⁷ Abram L. Harris, *The Negro as Capitalist: A Study of Banking and Business Among American Negroes* (Philadelphia: The American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1936), 59.

³⁸⁸ Harold Black, “The Effect of Common Bond on Credit Union Performance: The Case of Black-Controlled Credit Unions,” *The Review of Black Political Economy* 15:4 (Spring 1987): 91.

³⁸⁹ “Know Your Credit Union,” Pamphlet, Box 3, Folder 24, NAACP-WC.

³⁹⁰ Letter written by Virna Canson, Box 3, Folder 24, NAACP-WC.

the board members. In particular, she embraced his community aspect to the credit union and stated:

Like the family and other institutions that made it possible for man to realize so many of his ideals, the Credit Union Movement is basically economic. But it is more than that. It is charged with aspiration and idealism. It is warmly, humanly passionate. And it is demonstrating day by day that there is more real satisfaction and more business success in working together for the common good than in any free-for-all struggle to get ahead for everybody else.”³⁹¹

The NAACP Credit Union’s mission emphasized people working collectively together and providing the necessary resources for members to improve their financial standing. The institution offered realistic financial solutions that improved the daily lives of their members and members’ families.³⁹² In order to become an economically dominant institution, the Sacramento NAACP Credit Union needed more members to join and open accounts. Canson focused on promoting the democratic aspects of the credit union. Historically, the credit union gave the members equal power within the organization because each member had the same number of votes regardless of the amount they deposited.³⁹³ This gave blacks a remarkable opportunity to enter into a welcoming banking environment and serve in positions of management and ownership.³⁹⁴

Credit Unions as Tools for Education

Canson realized the potential the credit union had for creating economic opportunity for members. The credit union could provide a source of savings, low interest loans, life

³⁹¹ Virna Canson, Memorandum to the Officers, “ Analysis and Projection of the Credit Union’s Activities,” May 24, 1961, Box 7, Folder 1, NAACP-WC.

³⁹² “Sacramento Branch Newsletter.” Box 7, Folder 2, NAACP-WC.

³⁹³ This feature was not significant to the Sacramento NAACP Credit Union but was a feature in all credit unions.

³⁹⁴ Harold Black & Robert L. Schweitzer, “The Effect of Common Bond on Credit Unions Performance: The Case of Black Controlled Credit Unions,” *Review of Black Political Economy*, 15:4 (Spring, 1987): 89.

insurance, and money-management counseling.³⁹⁵ One of her first initiatives, a guiding principle of the overall Credit Union Movement, was educating the public about credit unions. Many people did not know how credit unions functioned and she had to convince potential members about the benefits of joining the credit union. Initially, many people were hesitant about joining the credit union because of their previous experiences with other banking institutions. Throughout the nation, blacks had difficulty obtaining loans in white controlled banks. Canson attempted to ameliorate their fears and focused the credit union educational programs on two prongs: convincing people that there were economic possibilities in the credit union and the importance of money management.³⁹⁶

One way she convinced people about the usefulness of the credit union was through public talks in environments where people were typically comfortable. Canson went to local churches and society clubs and gave talks that emphasized the differences between a traditional bank and a credit union and explained the structure of the credit union. She explained the structure of credit union and highlighted how credit unions were run and operated by members. She also put together pamphlets that outlined the basic functions of the credit union and these were distributed to the black community by mail and delivered to local churches. However, one of her favorite formats for addressing the public was through educational skits. Educational skits were presented in a light-hearted manner but stressed the benefits of belonging to a credit union, the mechanics of becoming a member, and the positive impact on community life of credit unions.³⁹⁷ The skits were followed with a

³⁹⁵ Virna Canson, "Report of Activities," Box 3, Folder 24, NAACP-WC.

³⁹⁶ "Sacramento Credit Union Newsletter," Box 7, Folder 5, NAACP-WC.

³⁹⁷ Asimolar, Outline of Skit for West Coast Credit Union Committee Biennial Regional Conference, October 31, 1959, Box 7, Folder 3, NAACP-WC.

question and answer session where prospective members asked questions and voiced their concerns.

The second main component of her education initiative focused on offering members an economic education that focused on two main areas: money management and thrift. At this time, Canson realized the importance of providing economic education for members, because the overall economy had changed after the war. Following World War II, the nation saw the emergence of postwar consumerism, which was caused by a booming economy coupled with an increase in production. Consumers had more disposable income at their fingertips, which created a demand for many products, including automobiles, televisions, and household goods. As historian Lizbeth Cohen noted in her work, from 1941 to 1961, the annual consumer income jumped from \$718 to \$2,513 per household.³⁹⁸ Retailers and manufactures wanted to tap into consumer spending and used clever marketing strategies that connected ownership of their product to the American dream.³⁹⁹ After World War II, companies eager to earn a buck manipulated the American dream and linked it with consumerism and one's purchasing power.⁴⁰⁰

In the post war environment, Americans bought into this new formulation of the American Dream. However, not everyone had equal access to the financial capital needed to participate in consumer culture. Retailers tapped into this market and developed

³⁹⁸ Lizbeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 195.

³⁹⁹ Lloyd Klein, *It's in the Cards: Consumer Credit and the American Experience* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers: 1999).

⁴⁰⁰ Several notable works that note the shift in the American Dream and how it becomes connected to consumerism are: Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1990); Lawrence B. Glickman, ed., *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader* (Ithaca: New York, 1999) and Daniel Horowitz, *The Anxieties of Affluence: Critiques of American Consumer Culture, 1939-1979* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009).

revolving credit programs, which allowed customers to purchase items they could otherwise not afford. In order to finance the American Dream, some Americans used lines of consumer credit and installment plans without realizing the real costs associated with this type of credit. They were drawn to credit programs because they could rely on future wages for their purchasing power rather than cash. The easy availability of consumer credit led to people believing they could afford items previously out of their financial reach. The false sense of economic buying power put consumers in an economically precarious positions.⁴⁰¹ Consumers in California were even more susceptible because there were few governmental regulations on in-store credit and installment plans. This left the consumer at an economic disadvantage, because the terms and availability of consumer credit seldom favored the consumer. Interest rates were extremely high and payment plans ensured the retailer made more money from the sale. Consumers were also exploited because they did not understand the agreement terms they signed and in some cases companies even changed the terms without informing the customer. Customers were lured in by practices of salesmanship and mistook good salesmanship for friendship and were duped into paying higher prices for items.⁴⁰² Due to their lack of knowledge about how interest rates worked and how rates compounded over time, less savvy consumers found themselves trapped in perpetual cycle of debt.

⁴⁰¹ There are several notable works that discuss the complications of consumer credit a few of these are: Grant David McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988); Gary S. Cross, *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); and Lendol Calder, *Financing the American Dream: A Cultural History of Consumer Credit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

⁴⁰² Virna Canson, Memo to NAACP Credit Union Board and Committee Members, "The Road Ahead for the NAACP Credit Union," October 14, 1963, Box 3, Folder 25, NAACP-WC.

Canson realized consumer credit, when used incorrectly, could economically cripple consumers. She understood the perilous position facing uneducated consumers and used the credit union as a platform for providing an economic education. For her, the credit union was not only a banking institution, but also functioned as an educational program. She wanted her members to understand the long-term impact of buying items on credit. To protect members from these economic pitfalls, Canson implemented economic educational programs for credit union members. The programs were designed to inform members about the risks involved in taking loans with high interest rates and using in-store credit, where interest compounded. In addition, the Sacramento NAACP Credit Union started money management counseling classes that attempted to address the economic illiteracy pervasive with the working poor.⁴⁰³ These classes included instruction on making wise purchases, the impact of interest rates, and introduced money saving practices to members. One of the main goals Canson envisioned for the programs was for people to design their own economic plan because she wanted members to realize the connection between their economic planning with their long-range goals they had for themselves and their children.⁴⁰⁴ Several members were already in trouble with their credit and were unable to pay off their debts. To help these members, she offered a debt liquidation course that assisted members in formulating realistic plans for eliminating their debts.⁴⁰⁵

Throughout the various programs offered by the credit union, Canson's overall goal was ensuring members had the economic resources and education necessary for making informed financial decisions. The Sacramento NAACP Credit Union even offered members

⁴⁰³ Virna Canson, "Report of Activities, NAACP Credit Union," Box 3, Folder 25, NAACP-WC.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ Virna Canson, Memo to Officers and Members of the Sacramento Branch NAACP Credit Union, September 13, 1962. Box 7, Folder 1, NAACP-WC.

a life estate plan, which protected member's families in the event of their death. Canson witnessed the economic devastation families experienced through when the primary breadwinner suddenly passed away. Families could not afford the costs associated with the funerals and burial and it took years for them to get back on their feet. The Life Estate Plan offered members an economic safety net for their families. For a small monthly fee, the plan covered any outstanding loans members had when they passed away and protected the borrower's family from debt incurred by after-life expenses.⁴⁰⁶

Perhaps the most important feature of the credit union was access to reasonable low-interest rate loans. Blacks were systematically denied access to white controlled banking institutions, which prevented them from receiving access to loans. The Sacramento NAACP Credit Union filled in this gap and provided a financial institution that was welcoming and looked out for the best interest of their members.⁴⁰⁷ Members could get low interest rate loans to purchase automobiles, household furnishings, homes and home improvement, medical services, and recreation. In addition, the credit union did not hide the costs associated with the loan and were clear about the actual costs associated with the repayment of the loan. Members who received loans were required to attend economic counseling sessions, which focused on using the loan wisely and outlined a plan for repayment. In some cases, the credit union developed yearly savings plans that provided members with strategies for planning their purchases.⁴⁰⁸

Another important tool the credit union used for educating members was their monthly newsletter. The monthly publication detailed the financial progress of the credit

⁴⁰⁶ "Know Your Credit Union," NAACP Pamphlet, Sacramento Branch NAACP Credit Union, Box 3, Folder 24, NAACP-WC.

⁴⁰⁷ Virna Canson, "Report of Activities, NAACP Credit Union," Box 3, Folder 25, NAACP-WC.

⁴⁰⁸ Know Your Credit Union," NAACP-WC.

union and included articles about important NAACP events and national news. In addition, each newsletter also had articles that provided helpful tips to members on how to save and use their money more effectively. Through these articles, Canson tried to inform members about having both regular checking and savings accounts. Several times a year, the newsletter ran short, informational pieces that outlined the steps required for starting a savings account. These included suggestions for how much money families should allocate in these accounts and recommended members place at least two months of their salary in savings. These pieces also warned members that their economic future was not guaranteed because there was never any certainty about future employment and health.⁴⁰⁹ The newsletters also provide tips for smaller daily changes members could incorporate to save money. For example, one article advised members to check the amount of air in their automobile tires, because properly inflated tires greatly improved gas mileage. At the start of the year, the newsletter suggested members make a list of their necessary yearly purchases and then come up with a monthly budget of what they needed to save in order to make their purchases. The newsletter's articles were not aimed at belittling members, but to inform them of smaller changes they could use to improve their economic position.⁴¹⁰

The Sacramento NAACP Credit Union worked diligently to educate members about the risks associated with taking high-interest loans and provided them with low-interest alternatives. Despite their efforts, delinquent loans were still an issue facing the credit union. Unfortunately, members ran into economic hardships due to changes in employment or health issues and failed to repay their loans. The credit union attempted to find solutions for these members and established new payments plans, which allowed them to pay off

⁴⁰⁹ Sacramento Branch NAACP Credit Union Newsletter, 1959, Box 7, Folder 5, NAACP-WC.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

their debt in a longer time period. However, members took advantage of the credit union's lenient policies. Some members viewed the credit union as a mutual aid society or as extension of the church that was there to help them in their time of economic need rather than as a business. One member wrote a letter to Canson and explained why they fell behind in their payments. She informed her, "As I explained to you last night \$158.65, every two weeks only goes so far...The most important thing this is for Ellis to finish school. I will do my utmost to see that he is able to finish. This will mean that we will do without, but Ellis and I feel that all together all things are possible."⁴¹¹ The member's letter did not show a sense of urgency in making sure she paid her loan. Moreover, the letter was sent more as an informative letter to Canson to make her realize what was important to her and her husband. Despite the tendency of some members to see the credit union as a mutual aid society, the credit union's delinquency rates remained relatively low during the first five years Canson ran the union.

Due to the credit union's affiliation with the NAACP, the credit union was much more than just a banking institution and served as a political arm for the NAACP. The credit union became a vehicle for advocating for civil rights and informing members about events occurring throughout the nation. In each monthly newsletter, the credit union included information about NAACP speakers and political events occurring in the community and throughout the nation. The newsletter continually asked for members to vote in upcoming elections and stressed the importance of the vote. For example, in one of the newsletter, the author wrote: "Increasingly the right to vote is being regarded by many prominent Americans as the panacea for most, if not all the evils confronting the southern

⁴¹¹ Betty S. Casson letter to Virna Canson, Box 7, Folder 2, NAACP-WC.

Negro. This view has been expressed by such liberals as President Kennedy, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt and other political leaders and commentators.”⁴¹² The newsletter not only stressed the importance of voting but provided members with places and times to register to vote.⁴¹³

Expanding Opportunities for the Youth

Canson took the Sacramento NAACP Credit Union and used it as a platform to create opportunities for the black youth. She had a vested interest in promoting programs for the youth. Besides having children of her own, she had served as the advisor of the Youth Chapter of the Sacramento NAACP during her first few years living in the city. She was encouraged by the intelligence and enthusiasm of the young people involved in the Youth Chapter and wished to foster their educational growth. Canson desperately wanted young people to strive to become more than garbage men. To facilitate this process, she started an internship program at the Sacramento NAACP Credit Union and hired several college students each year. Students involved in program gained valuable experience working in the world of banking. They also had the privilege of learning and working alongside individuals in management positions. A key component of the program was the mentorship program, which connected interns with community leaders who served as role models for the students.⁴¹⁴ Outside of the internship program, there were other opportunities for students to work in the credit union. Canson opened up work experiences to any student, regardless of race, who was eager to learn about the credit union and was working towards a degree in banking or economics. For example, the Sacramento Branch had an Arabian

⁴¹² “Don’t Forget to Exercise Your Right to Vote,” Credit Union Newsletter, October 12, 1962, Box 7, Folder 2, NAACP-WC.

⁴¹³ Sacramento Branch Newsletters, Box 7, Folder 5, NAACP-WC.

⁴¹⁴ “NAACP Credit Union,” *The Credit Union Bridge Magazine*, March, 1963, Box 7, Folder 3, NAACP-WC.

student who was working toward his CPA certificate and he worked with the credit union's accountant.⁴¹⁵ The internship program and employment of college students provided young people with an invaluable experience that set the stage for them to advance in society. This was particularly important given the lack of professional opportunities for young blacks.

The Sacramento NAACP Credit Union also served as a platform for promoting the values of black middle-class leadership to young women. Canson grew up with these life values and wanted to see the next generation follow these principles. One way she accomplished this was by starting a Credit Union Queen Contest. In 1955, she set up the yearly contest and invited other credit union branches to participate in the contest as well. In the 1950s, queen contests were incredibly popular throughout the nation and were common in the black community. Several organizations had queen contests to celebrate young women and promote the value systems affiliated with their organizations. Black businesses were also known to use queen contests as promotional tactics for their business and to create connections with other businesses.⁴¹⁶ Canson realized the potential the queen contest had for promoting the ideals of the credit union and she also wanted to celebrate the achievements of young women.

The Sacramento NAACP Credit Union Queen Contest open to high school girls planning to attend college after they graduated. The queen candidates were required to go into the community and ask for sponsorship from an organization, business, or club that held shareholdings in the credit union. Their sponsorship served as an endorsement of the candidate by the community as an individual who was both upstanding and had good

⁴¹⁵ "NAACP Credit Union," *The Credit Union Bridge Magazine*.

⁴¹⁶ Susannah Walker, *Style and Status: Selling to African American Women, 1920-1975* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2007), 165.

grades. During the contest, every young woman gave a speech about the credit union that focused on the functions of the credit union. Canson took the contest very seriously and she made sure each participant was guided through a rigorous coaching process, which prepared her for the contest and provided her with mentorship.⁴¹⁷ The branch president, Mr. Alex Moore, stated, “ Such promotional programs which attract more members of the credit union provide the opportunity for the credit union to do a much-needed service to persons whom the NAACP was designed, to serve through low cost loans, systematic savings and consumer education.”⁴¹⁸ The Credit Union Queen contest provided a unique platform for young women to display their skills and was a vital component in connecting the activities of the credit union within the larger black Sacramentan community.

NAACP Credit Union Expansion Throughout the State

By 1958, the Sacramento NAACP Credit Union had grown from a mere thirty members to 358 members.⁴¹⁹ The credit union accumulated \$164,548 in assets and could provide their members with more benefits. During the 1958 fiscal year, they gave out \$127,000 in loans, which averaged out to more than \$10,000 each month.⁴²⁰ After a few short years at the helm, Canson successfully turned the small fledgling credit union into a thriving banking institution. The local branch of the NAACP recognized her hard work and presented her with the D. D. Mattock Achievement Award. In the same year, Franklin H. Williams, then serving in the capacity of Secretary-Counsel of the Western Region of the NAACP, asked Canson to found at least five other credit unions within the region. Williams

⁴¹⁷ Sacramento Branch NAACP Credit Union Newsletter, October 21, 1963, Box 7, Folder 2, NAACP-WC.

⁴¹⁸ “Credit Union ‘Queen’ to Be Chosen Saturday, August 1, 1963,” *Sacramento Bee*, Box 42, Folder 4, NAACP-WC.

⁴¹⁹ Sacramento Branch NAACP Credit Union Financial and Statistical Report, Period Ending January 31, 1958, Box 3, Folder 25, NAACP-WC.

⁴²⁰ “What the Branches are Doing,” *The Crisis*, May 1958, Vol 65, 5, 303.

saw the potential credit unions could have for the NAACP and was anxious to see more credit unions established. He told her to use their Western office to prepare communications and the office would cover her transportation costs for work related to organizing other credit unions.⁴²¹

Canson accepted William's challenge and formulated a comprehensive plan to increase the number of credit unions in California and the west coast region of the NAACP.⁴²² She spearheaded the drive to organize credit unions and assisted in program development and proposal writing in several communities.⁴²³ She had a remarkable ability to convince other communities to start their own NAACP Credit Union. However, she also realized that each community needed a certain base in order to have financially successful credit unions. Community leaders from other towns and cities approached Canson and requested her help in organizing their own credit union. Building credit unions was not an easy task and Canson carefully assessed whether or not the community had enough potential members and leadership invested to the process. In order to measure community interest, she held workshop style meetings that provided a comprehensive overview of the difficulties and benefits founding a credit union. During these meetings she emphasized the importance of identifying the membership of qualified, conscientious leadership first. After her initial assessment, she coordinated training sessions that guided them through a step-by-step tutorial for forming the credit union.⁴²⁴

⁴²¹ Letter from Franklin H. Williams to Virna Canson, February 26, 1958, Box 34, Folder 53, NAACP-WC.

⁴²² Letter from Franklin Williams to Canson, February 26, 1958, Box 3, Folder: 24, NAACP-WC.

⁴²³ Virna Canson, "Waging the War," 2.

⁴²⁴ Letter to Franklin H. Williams from Canson, December 15, 1954, Box 3, Folder 24, NAACP-WC.

In 1954, The Vallejo chapter of the NAACP asked Canson for help in establishing a credit union. She assessed the viability of a credit union in Vallejo and determined they had enough members and potential members to successfully open a branch. For several months they worked on a plan of operation and by January of 1955, thirty-two members deposited \$149 and opened the Vallejo NAACP Credit Union. The branch found a strong female to lead the credit union and appointed Grace Logan as Treasurer-Manager.⁴²⁵ Canson did not limit her work to California and even helped NAACP branches in the West with credit unions. In the spring of 1955, Mr. L.C. Thomas, the president of the Kodiak Branch of the NAACP in Alaska requested help with funding members. Canson suggested the easiest way for Thomas to accomplish this task was with a credit union. She contacted the regional director of the credit union and arranged for a field man to meet with Thomas.⁴²⁶

From 1953 to 1965, with the assistance of the California Credit Union League she helped establish twenty – eight credit unions in low income areas including Los Angeles, Alameda, San Francisco, San Joaquin, Kern, Ventura, Riverside, Contra Costa, and Tulare Counties.⁴²⁷ Not all of the credit unions Canson helped establish were a part of the NAACP. Canson assisted other organizations that showed interest in creating a credit union. In 1963, she worked with the Lady of Guadalupe Church and ensured the church received materials from CUNA in Spanish and arranged for another minister to meet with Father Lucas and Father Miles to help them start a credit union.⁴²⁸ In 1963, the California Credit Union League recognized her work throughout the state and she received the Founders Award,

⁴²⁵ Letter to Franklin H. Williams from Canson, January 10, 1955, Box 42, Folder 40, NAACP-WC.

⁴²⁶ Letter from Virna Canson to Mr. L.C. Thomas, May 4, 1955, Box 42, Folder 40, NAACP-WC.

⁴²⁷ Virna Canson, "Waging the War," 2.

⁴²⁸ Letter from Virna Canson to Frenchy, July 25, 1963, Box 42, Folder 40, NAACP-WC.

which was an award given to the person who organized the most credit unions during the year.⁴²⁹

Through her work with the credit union, Canson realized blacks had an enormous potential for economic power and pushed for greater economic autonomy. She understood if they harnessed their economic power together into one unified organization, they could become a formidable economic force. Canson convinced people in California about the value of the credit unions, but she also wanted the national branch of the NAACP to embrace a larger credit union movement. She approached the national branch of the NAACP and requested they focus more of their agenda on economic empowerment. Canson supplied the national branch with evidence of the growth of economic power through credit unions in the West Coast Region. She informed them that over a quarter of a million dollars was already controlled and at work amongst NAACP people in the West Coast Region. She asked them to imagine the potential they had if they did more throughout the entire country. Canson claimed,

We are all agreed that this is merely a drop in the bucket compared to other financial institutions, but this is a very encouraging start. We have it within our power to pool our economic resources through the credit union... which can bring about relief from those lending institutions in our communities that charge exorbitant rates of interest, and to bring security to our members.⁴³⁰

For Canson, economic liberation represented 85% of the battle for civil rights and that the national branch should expand on credit unions.⁴³¹ She envisioned that the credit unions on the West Coast could serve as the leaders of a larger credit union movement within the NAACP.

⁴²⁹ Letter for the CCUL Volunteer Organizers Committee to Virna Canson, October 21, 1963, Box 42, Folder 38, NAACP-WC.

⁴³⁰ "Report on West Coast Region NAACP Credit Union," Box 3, Folder 25, NAACP-WC.

⁴³¹ Letter by Virna Canson, Box 3, Folder 24, NAACP-WC.

Canson understood that if they shouldered the responsibility to help establish credit unions and inspire others to organize, the black community could flourish without relying on governmental intervention.⁴³² In order to facilitate this growth, she turned to the national level of the NAACP for support. She approached Tarea Pittman Hall about including a credit union resolution on the agenda for the National Convention. Canson wrote in a letter, “Tarea informs me she has asked Mr. Wilkins and Mr. Morsel to program something in on Credit Unions at the National Convention. I certainly hope that this materializes. I have had occasions to discuss our Credit Union with people from various parts of the country during several precious conventions, which I attended... as a valid means for taking to the other side economically.”⁴³³ At the 1963 NAACP National Convention delegates responded favorably to the expansion of credit unions and passed the resolution. Despite the passage of the resolution in 1963, most of the NAACP credit unions founded still appeared in the West under the guidance of Canson.

Canson built a name for herself in the Sacramento and California Credit Unions and she was well regarded by the Credit Union National Association (CUNA). Canson utilized her respected position within CUNA as leverage to openly confront and challenge CUNA’s acceptance of discriminatory practices. In 1963, CUNA highlighted the achievements of the Sacramento branch and two other NAACP branches in their monthly publication, *Bridge*. By this point, the Sacramento h was the largest of more than 1,500 branches of NAACP throughout the United States. In preparing the article for publication, CUNA requested supplementary information on the branch from Canson. She decided to use the opportunity

⁴³² “Report of Activities and Financial Report of 14 NAACP Credit Union for the period ending June 30, 1961,” Box 7, Folder 1, NAACP-WC.

⁴³³ Letter to Dr. Calvin D. Banks, March 9, 1962, Box 34, Folder 7, NAACP-WC.

to inform CUNA about the inherent differences and complications facing NAACP branches. Canson knew the NAACP credit unions dealt with segregation and discrimination and wanted CUNA acknowledge and address these practices. She openly challenged CUNA to revisit their policies and wrote:

There is a widespread misunderstanding among both federal and state chartering agencies, inadequate knowledge of the credit union philosophy, principles, and basic business operation among NAACP leadership and potential membership, and traditional practices of segregation in the Southern states and occasional ones outside the South form the complex for those who would organize, supervise, and run credit unions in NAACP branches.⁴³⁴

She wished that CUNA to take a more aggressive stance against discriminatory practices and wanted them to assisted more in areas that were economically depressed.

However, she was tactical in addressing her concerns with the organization. In correspondence with CUNA she often opened with compliments about the progress of the organization. For example, in one letter she praised CUNA for their commitment to over 27,000 credit unions throughout the nation and the extension of services to underdeveloped countries. She then chastised CUNA for having a “running away attitude” in the organization that ignored the socio-economically depressed in the country. She also used every opportunity she could to highlight the discriminatory practices of other member institutions within the League because she wanted CUNA to address these practices.⁴³⁵ For instance, she drew their attention to the actions of the credit union association in Mississippi. The NAACP Credit Union could not participate in most of the Mississippi league activities because the league meetings were held in locations that refused to serve

⁴³⁴ Virna Canson’s Supplementary Information for *Bridges*, 1963, Box 42, Folder 40, NAACP-WC.

⁴³⁵ “Sacramento Branch NAACP Credit Unions Resolution,” July 1963, Box 22, Folder 5, NAACP-WC.

blacks.⁴³⁶ She believed that as the guiding institution for the credit union, CUNA had the responsibility of enforcing equitable practices between member institutions.

Canson also brought attention to CUNA's own racist practices and procedures. In November of 1962, she received a piece of promotional material from CUNA's Public Relations Department that she felt crossed the line. CUNA distributed the material to member institutions to help them inform members about the availability of automobile loans. However, CUNA's Public Relations Department devised a campaign that consisted of distributing replicas of the Confederate dollars to their members. Members brought in the replica Confederate dollar and turned them in for a five-dollar auto script book they could use at any Union Oil Service Station. Exasperated by the overt racism of the promotion, Canson wrote a kindly worded, but harsh letter, to the Clarence Murphy, the managing director. She used the opportunity to educate Murphy about the historical context of the Confederate bill and wrote, "The use of confederate bills, even though I am convinced the Union Oil Center Federal Credit Union viewed this as a clever promotional scheme, is offensive."⁴³⁷ She reasoned that perhaps what appeared to represent a clever marketing and advertising crossed a line because, "Many of the problems arise from the fact that there has been too much indulgence in the un-American attitudes of the South."⁴³⁸ She explained that CUNA's usage of the bill held a larger societal message that they might not be aware of to: "Save your confederate money-the South will rise again." After he received her letter, Murphy contemplated her objections and responded that they were shocked by her reaction to the promotional plan. However, he acknowledged that they never considered that the

⁴³⁶ Letter from Canson to Rossie. Box 44, Folder 4, NAACP-WC.

⁴³⁷ Letter Virna Canson to Clarence Murphy, November 7, 1963, Box 42, Folder 40, NAACP-WC.

⁴³⁸ Ibid.

confederate bill might be objectionable because of racial issues. Murphy wrote to Canson, “I suppose it is natural for those of us who have been so preoccupied with the business of the League not to have the opportunity to familiarize ourselves with the issues involved and to overlook the possible reactions of those more intimately involved, and we sincerely appreciate your comments.”⁴³⁹

She continued to work on educating people about sound economic practices and increased the activities of credit unions throughout the state. In 1964, she wanted to expand her money management programs and applied for a Community Action Program grant under the Economic Opportunity Act. The year 1964 was a momentous year in the struggle for civil rights because it appeared that the country was ready to embrace racial equality. President Johnson pushed Congress to pass two bills that changed the lives of millions of Americans: the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Economic Opportunity Act. President Johnson continued the civil right’s work that President John F. Kennedy began and used his death to garner backing for the bills. Johnson spoke before a Joint Session of Congress just four days after the assassination of Kennedy and urged them to support the passage of a civil rights bill. He stated, “No memorial oration or eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy’s memory than the earliest possible passage of the civil rights bill for which he fought so long.”⁴⁴⁰ Congress responded to his appeal and passed The Civil Rights Act of 1964, which was landmark piece of legislation that forbade discrimination on the basis of race, religion, color, sex or national origin.

Another critical piece of legislation was the Economic Opportunity Act, which addressed the pressing economic needs of those suffering from unemployment and poverty.

⁴³⁹ Letter from Clarence Murphy to Canson, November 13, 1963 Box 42, Folder 40, NAACP-WC.

⁴⁴⁰ Lyndon B. Johnson, Address Before a Joint Session Before Congress, November 27, 1963.

The prosperity of the 1950s did not change the lives of all Americans and by the 1960s there were more than forty million people lived in poverty. Sociologist, Michael Harrington, studied poverty in the United States and he revealed in his work *The Other America* that there were millions of “invisible” Americans who lived well outside the “affluent society” the middle and upper classes were accustomed. He argued that the poor were isolated in substandard housing and, “ The total impact of housing programs in postwar American has been to squeeze more and more people into existing slums.”⁴⁴¹ Harrington’s work came as a shock to the nation and President Lyndon B. Johnson decided to confront the issue of poverty. He declared in his State of the Union Address, “Many Americans live on the outskirts of hope-some because of their poverty, and some because of their color, and all too many because of both. Our task is to help replace their despair with opportunity.”⁴⁴²

The passage of the Economic Opportunities Act led to the creation of the Office of Economic Opportunity, which focused on implementing programs that attacked the roots of poverty. Under Title II of the act, local organizations were able to apply for federal funding for Community Action Programs. Community Action Programs were aimed at empowering poor communities and led to an upsurge in grassroots organizing. The program provided funding for community action agencies that operated antipoverty programs. Members of the community staffed these programs because the federal government trusted they could service the specific needs of the community.⁴⁴³ In 1964, Canson capitalized on Johnson’s War on Poverty programs and applied for a \$20,000 grant to fund a Community Action

⁴⁴¹ Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: Touchstone, 1962, 1993), 5.

⁴⁴² President Lyndon B. Johnson, State of the Union Address, January 8, 1964.

⁴⁴³ William Clayson, *Freedom is Not Enough: The War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 32.

Program. She submitted a grant proposal for a program entitled Low-Income Family Economics or LIFE.

The goal of LIFE was to expand the money management services of the Sacramento NAACP Credit Union to the working and lower classes. The government chose to fund her program, and LIFE became the very first Community Action Program. She took the money from grant and employed several money management specialists and two consumer counselors who worked within the Sacramento NAACP Credit Union. In addition, they hired two counselor aides who went into low-income neighborhoods and conducted house meetings. The program instructed participants on money management tips and strategies to save money. One effective method they used in the program was comparative shopping tours. These tours were designed to educate individuals on the price differences in retail stores and to teach participants how to do price comparisons. They realized the stores located in low income neighborhoods often charged higher prices for the same items and they wanted program participants to become aware of other places they could shop and save more money.⁴⁴⁴ The LIFE program also joined forces with the money management unit of the county welfare department. The money management specialists and two consumer counselors went into the welfare department and gave group presentations to workers and welfare recipients. They also developed and distributed consumer literature that provided the public with money saving tips and informed them about their rights as consumers. In

⁴⁴⁴ 1964 Pamphlet, Box 43, Folder 34, NAACP-WC.

order to reach the greatest number of people, they produced broadcast radio announcements in both English and in Spanish.⁴⁴⁵

In addition to her work on the LIFE program, she continued to assist other credit unions. In the early 1960s, several of the NAACP credit union branches, including the Sacramento NAACP Credit Union, experienced financial difficulties. She worked to bring them back to financial solvency, but this proved to be a difficult task in a down economy. In 1964, Canson requested help from the Office of Economic Opportunity to assist the 29 low-income credit unions organized in California. She also reached out to the director of the California Credit Union League and requested funds to help stabilize these credit unions. Canson informed the director that these credit unions still had potential because each still had at least 40-50 people involved in the credit union. Furthermore, the credit unions were in areas where they could grow to 1000 to 5000 members. Canson also asked Nathaniel Colley, who was then President of the Sacramento Branch of the Credit Union to request stabilization assistance from the California Credit Union League's Stabilization Committee. However, the committee decided that would not provide the funds they needed to restore the credit union to solvency. The board voted that the credit union had to share scaled down and authorized the expenditure of \$20,000 to partially offset the credit union's deficit condition. They requested \$85,000 to \$90,000 but the Stabilization fund only had \$75,000 for the entire state and could not accommodate their request.⁴⁴⁶

According to *Jet* journalist, Chester Higgins, "Credit unions came into being because the doors of most legitimate lending institutions were closed to the 'great unwashed,' the

⁴⁴⁵ Virna Canson, "A Summary of Consumer Education Activities of the California State Office of Economic Opportunity, April 1965 to February 1967," Folder 3751:76, Sacramento State Archives 25.

⁴⁴⁶ California Credit Union League to Nathaniel Colley, Request for Stabilization Assistance, April 11, 1968, Box 47. Folder 1, NAACP-WC.

faceless little man who desperately needs a consumer loan from time to time.”⁴⁴⁷ The proliferation of the credit union movement under the leadership of Canson provides a fuller picture of alternative methods blacks used to counter discrimination. In addition, it reveals the ability of the black community to coalesce and form their lucrative institutions during a time period when they were historically segregated from entrance into “White” America. Canson’s involvement in credit unions elevated her political and social status in Sacramento and throughout the state.

1964 Democratic National Convention

It was her position as Treasurer/Manager of the Sacramento Credit Union that became the vehicle for the overall Credit Union Movement in the NAACP. However, her leadership in the NAACP also provided Canson with a platform for a larger civil rights agenda. Canson’s work with credit unions and her success in implementing LIFE drew the attention of Governor Pat Brown. Governor Brown recognized Canson’s role in the creation of credit unions and saw her as a state leader. She was chosen by Governor Brown to serve as a member of the California delegation to the credentials committee for the 1964 Democratic National Convention. This convention was particularly heated because of the controversy surrounding the seating of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). The MFDP charged that the regular Democrats of Mississippi did not represent blacks because they were excluded from voting in the primary.⁴⁴⁸ As a member of the credentials

⁴⁴⁷ Chester Higgins, “Church Credit Unions Lead,” *Jet* (Jan. 21, 1965):21.

⁴⁴⁸ Fannie Lou Hamer and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee activists created the MFDP after they discovered that the Mississippi Democratic Party would not work with them. The MFDP claimed that the official Democratic Party did not represent them because blacks were not allowed to vote. Several important works that acknowledge the importance of Fannie Lou Hamer and the MFDP are: Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press,

committee she was charged with whether or not to seat the delegates from the MFDP. The credentials committee also had to decide if blacks were accepted and had voting rights within the regular Democratic Party in Mississippi.

Canson was considered one of the most influential members of the California delegation because she was well liked by Governor Brown and was a part of the black elite in California. She had not only made a name for herself at this point, but her husband, Clarence, was an up and coming individual. Clarence was president of the Sacramento NAACP it seemed he would soon be picked for a federal judgeship.⁴⁴⁹ Canson was only one of seven black members on the credentials committee and the MFDP realized they needed her vote. She listened to hours of testimony including Fannie Lou Hamer who testified about how she lost the job she held for eighteen years because she tried to register to vote. Hamer's heart wrenching testimony detailed her harrowing experience in jail where three white men, one from the State Patrol, told her "we're going to make you wish you were dead." She described in detail how two black men were ordered to beat her with a black jack for hours. As tears streamed down her face, Fannie pleaded with the committee to seat the MFDP, "Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, were we have to sleep with telephones off the hook because of threats?"⁴⁵⁰ Her emotional remarks had a significant impact on the committee, half of which were women, and President Johnson purposefully cut television coverage of the testimony short.⁴⁵¹

1995); and Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999).

⁴⁴⁹ Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer*, 88

⁴⁵⁰ Newspapers all throughout the nation carried the story about Fannie Lou Hamer's testimony to the 1964 Democratic National Convention. The story ran on August 23rd of 1964 and detailed her harrowing experiences.

⁴⁵¹ Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 89

Canson and others on the committee also heard from individuals who were against the seating of the MFDP. Many members of the regular Democratic Party argued that the MFDP was full of known Communists or had communist affiliations. State senator and democratic national committeeman, E.K. Collins argued the MFDP was nothing more than a “rump group, ” a group put together by non-Mississippians, who wanted to “throw democracy to the wind.” Canson questioned Collins and his affiliations and asked if twenty percent of the population voting on the governor’s election was truly representative of the state. She continued and enquired if Collins was a member of the Ku Klux Klan or the White Citizens Council and if he believed in the principles of those organizations. Collins responded that he was not a member of either organization and he did not know of any convention delegates who were Klansmen.⁴⁵² Canson attended every hour of the sessions and she did not return to her hotel room until two or three in the morning.⁴⁵³

The credentials committee knew they had a difficult decision in front of them and attempted to craft a compromise between the MFDP and the regular Democrats of Mississippi. The MFDP party’s liberal leaders suggested that the seats be evenly divided between the MFDP and the regular Democrats of Mississippi.⁴⁵⁴ However, Roy Wilkins and Bayard Rustin worked out a compromise to seat two of the sixty-eight MFDP delegates that were chosen by President Johnson. Canson had trouble deciding if she would vote in favor of the compromise. She wrote a list of points in favor of the MFDP and wrote that the regular Democratic Party of Mississippi did not represent blacks in Mississippi. She noted that seating the party was a moral issue because, “Democracy is indeed strong medicine but

⁴⁵² “LBJ Considering Several for Second Place on Ticket,” *The Racine Journal*, August 23, 1964, 2.

⁴⁵³ “State Delegate is ‘Baptized’ in Dixie Credentials,” *The Fresno Bee*, August 26, 1964, 11.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

when watered down it becomes sickening and ineffective.”⁴⁵⁵ Canson was unsure about the proposed compromise and the Democratic Party pressured her to not sign the minority report. Other factors complicated her decision; her husband was on the path to becoming a judge. She worried that her vote would detrimentally impact his political support to become a judge. Canson received a note suggesting that “her husband’s desire to be a judge” would be jeopardized if she voted in favor of the MFDP. However, Canson’s husband told her to do what she thought was right and not to worry about him.⁴⁵⁶ She was also aware of the difficulty passing a resolution that satisfied both the MFDP and the regular Democratic Party and believed a compromise was necessary. The credentials committee passed the compromise and Canson later commented that it was the hardest but most exciting job of her career in politics.⁴⁵⁷

When she returned to Sacramento from Atlantic City, Governor Brown recognized her work within the Credentials Committee and NAACP Credit Unions. Brown offered her a position within the state’s Consumer Advisory Commission. He wanted to use her expertise as a credit union specialist to help more of the working poor in the state. She accepted the position because she could expand the credit union principles to a wider audience, and through her experience on the credentials committee she became acutely aware of how underrepresented blacks were in state governmental positions. Canson left her position Sacramento NAACP Credit Union but during her time at the helm she took the branch from a small, underutilized resource to an economic powerhouse. When she left the Sacramento Credit Union, the branch had outgrown its initial space, accumulated more than \$400,000 in

⁴⁵⁵ Virna Canson, handwritten note, “Points in Favor of Mississippi Freedom Party,” Box 43, Folder 16, NAACP-WC.

⁴⁵⁶ Lisa Anderson Todd, *For the Voice and the Vote: My Journey with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 300.

⁴⁵⁷ State Delegate is ‘Baptized’ in Dixie Credentials,” *The Fresno Bee*, August 26, 1964, 11.

assets, and included 1,600 members. Moreover, she was responsible for helping with the creation of nearly thirty new branches in the state. Canson believed that they had accomplished part of her goal to create economic freedom for the black community and went into her position as a Credit Union and Consumer Specialist hopeful she could increase the economic power of minorities throughout the state.

Chapter 6

“Voices for the Consumer: Fighting for Economic Protection”

“There is no doubt that the civil rights gains in housing and employment are eroded by consumer exploitation.”

-Virna Canson

When Canson expanded the credit union movement she recognized greater issues hampered the economic progress of every Californian. Credit unions addressed some of these issues; however, there were few legal protections for the consumer. The credit union could only do so much and educated consumers about savings, thrift, and asset protection, but the larger market economy was riddled with economic risk. Corporations and retailers utilized unethical business practices that deceived, manipulated, and endangered the health and well being of the consumer. These practices largely went unchecked because big business had the economic upper hand and used lobbyists to ensure their business and profit margins were protected. Canson advocated for consumer protections because she believed consumer rights went hand-in-hand with equal access to education, housing, and employment.

In 1964, Governor Brown appointed Canson to the Consumer Advisory Commission to serve as a credit union specialist. Canson accepted the appointment because she trusted Governor Brown’s commitment to the counsel and viewed Brown as an ally in the larger movement for equality. She also realized the office provided her with the opportunity to expand her focus on consumer rights to minorities throughout the state. Canson accepted the appointment because she believed the CAC could protect California consumers and could function as a vehicle to raise the consciousness of consumers. The

CAC was largely comprised of women and was led by Helen Ewing Nelson, who was highly educated and became a leader of the consumer rights movement in California and in the nation. The CAC worked to get laws passed that protected consumers and lobbied against laws that harmed consumers. The Consumers Advisory Counsel worked diligently to ensure California consumers were protected and regulatory frameworks were in place. Women throughout the state were drawn to the work of the CAC because they viewed consumer's rights as a natural extension of their household duties. Canson's work in the CAC allowed her to become a state leader and she used her position within the counsel to promote racial equality. Canson connected economic freedom with the work of the CAC and helped to rebuilding efforts of Watts after the Watts' Rebellion.⁴⁵⁸

Throughout his election campaign, Governor Brown maintained his commitment to helping minorities and the lower classes. When Brown was elected Governor of California he brought with him years of experience as an attorney and then Attorney General. Throughout his earlier career, he was acutely aware of the racial issues impacting the state. When he ran for governor he made the creation of the consumer Counsel Office one of his ten commitments to the people of California. True to his word, Brown pushed to establish an Office of Consumer Counsel. Governor Brown stated, "We are all consumers. Yet we have never been able to speak in a single voice because we are disorganized and our needs are so diverse. Without a forceful spokesman in government, we have little defense against highly organized special interests."⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁸ This dissertation will utilize the term rebellion because what occurred in Watts happened was the result of the continuation of racial injustices and persistence of poverty an inequality in Watts pushed individuals to rebel against these practices.

⁴⁵⁹ "California Woman Appointed to Consumer Advisory Committee," *Daily Defender*, August 13, 1962, 14.

In the postwar economy, after enduring years of limited buying power Americans were eager to purchase new goods and services that flooded the market. During the Great Depression, most people did not have discretionary incomes and struggled to meet their daily needs. America's entrance into World War II brought full employment and prosperity to America. The gross national product increased from \$91 billion in 1939 to \$166 billion in 1945 and created 17 million new jobs.⁴⁶⁰ However, the war shifted the mechanisms of manufacturing to military production. The war ended the depression and Americans had the economic resources, but the nation's focus on the war created a patriotic consumer. The Office of Price Administration (OPA) implemented rationing programs to conserve rubber supplies, gasoline consumption, canned foods, sugar, coffee, butter, shoes and other staple items.⁴⁶¹ Another important function of the OPA was the implementation of price controls on goods. Their anti-inflation program helped wage and price controls and promoted the equitable distribution of scarce goods.⁴⁶² Patriotic consumers participated in rationing and purchased war bonds because they thought efforts on the home front aided soldiers fighting in the European theater.⁴⁶³ The war empowered consumers who volunteered for OPA

⁴⁶⁰ John Morton Blum, *V Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture during World War II* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1976), 91.

⁴⁶¹ John W. Jeffries, *Wartime America: The World War II Home Front* (New York: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), 30.

⁴⁶² *Ibid*, 31.

⁴⁶³ Advertisers played an important part in promoting patriotic consumers. Several important works covering the role of advertisers during WWII are: Frank W. Fox, *Madison Goes to Work: The Strange Military Career of American Advertising, 1941-1945* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1975); Stephen Fox, *The Mirror Makers: A History of American Advertising and Its Creators* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1984); and Harvard Sitikoff, "The American Home Front," in *Produce and Conserve: Share and Play Square: The Grocer and the Consumer on the Home-Front Battlefield during World War II*, ed. by Barbara McLean Ward, (Portsmouth, NH: Strawbery Banke Museum, 1994), 36-56.

community activities and organized at the local level to influence retailers and protest hikes and shortages.⁴⁶⁴

Following World War II, consumption represented a central feature of the American identity. The role of the consumer within a free market economy was linked with the ideals of citizenship and tied into larger notions of democracy. Americans access to goods and wealth provided people with the freedom to purchase new technologies. Moreover, consumerism in the postwar years went beyond purchasing goods and services and represented cultural values.⁴⁶⁵ In the famous “Kitchen Debate,” then Vice President Richard Nixon engaged in an impromptu debate with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev at the opening of the American National Exhibition in Moscow. The exhibit showcased the benefits American women had because of their ability to access modern technologies, such as the washing machine. Khrushchev scoffed at the poor craftsmanship of the model home, but Nixon countered that the “American system is designed to take advantage of new inventions and new techniques.”⁴⁶⁶ At the heart of their debate was the central question about which political systems was better: one based upon a free market economy or a planned economy.

In the United States, industrial innovation was accompanied with new ways to sell products to the consumer. In response to deceptive practices used to in both the promotion and production of products grassroots organizations emerged, which was primarily

⁴⁶⁴ Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 332.

⁴⁶⁵ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 18.

⁴⁶⁶ Sarah Phillips and Shane Hamilton, *The Kitchen Debate and Cold War Politics: A Brief History with Documents* (New York, Bedford/St. Martins, 2014).

comprised of women, drew attention to issues of product quality and value.⁴⁶⁷ An overlooked story of the black freedom struggle is the connection it had with the consumer rights movement. The consumer rights movement focused on protecting consumers through organized social movement. The movement started before the 1960s and initially concentrated on getting higher wages for workers and better prices on goods.⁴⁶⁸ Consumer activism played a significant role in the history of the Civil Rights Movement. Grassroots groups effectively organized boycotts against businesses that did not hire blacks and started “Don’t buy where you can’t work” campaigns throughout the nation. They used boycotts as a tool to take a stance against racist practices. These campaigns were successful because they drew the nation’s attention to the every day impact of legalized segregation that led to the perpetuation of violence against blacks.

New Dangers to the Consumer

However, the consumer movement continued and took on a different angle in the 1960s. In 1962, President Kennedy specifically addressed the rights of the consumer to Congress and stated, “The federal Government—by nature the highest spokesman for all the people—has a special obligation to be alert to the consumer’s needs and to advance the consumer’s interests.”⁴⁶⁹ Kennedy outlined four basic consumer rights: a right to safety, a right to choose among a variety of products and services at competitive prices, and a right to a fair hearing by government during the formation of public policy. Consumer activists built upon Kennedy’s call for consumer rights and emphasized the *hidden* dangers in

⁴⁶⁷ Lawrence Glickman, *Buying Power: A History of Consumer Activism in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 173.

⁴⁶⁸ For more on the earlier consumer movements please see, Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in the Twentieth Century America* (Princeton University Press, 2007)

⁴⁶⁹ John F. Kennedy, “Special Message to the Congress on Protecting the Consumer Interest,” March 15, 1962 .

products. Historian Lawrence Glickman examined the history of consumer activism and discovered generations of consumer activists shared a view of the consumer as a potentially robust political character and viewed shopping as a “simultaneously social, moral, and political act.”⁴⁷⁰

After the war, retailers and manufacturers utilized a number of techniques to produce and promote their products. Companies manufactured products that were of poor quality and included materials or ingredients that endangered the health and safety of the consumer. In the 1960s, several individuals drew attention to these practices and started national debates about the responsibility of manufacturers and the role the government should take protecting consumers. Ralph Nader’s groundbreaking publication *Unsafe at Any Speed: The Designed in Dangers of the American Automobile* (1965) helped launch the consumer rights revolution. Nader’s work informed consumers of the faulty designs of the General Motors car, Corvair, and blamed the safety standards of the American auto giants for the increasing number of injuries and fatalities on the highways. Nader played a critical role in the passage of the National Traffic and Vehicle Safety Act. He believed big business was out of control and the government allowed practices that took advantage of consumer health and safety. He pushed for the government to implement tighter enforcement of legislation and wanted the creation of new agencies to protect consumers.⁴⁷¹ While Nader’s work in the area of consumer’s rights was important, there were already forces at work at the grassroots and state levels in California.

⁴⁷⁰ Glickman, *Buying Power*, 5.

⁴⁷¹ Diana Klebanow and Franklin L. Jones, *People’s Lawyers: Crusaders for Justice in American History* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2003), 415-433.

When Brown took over as governor, the state represented the strongest economy in the nation but there were few laws regulating interstate business. World War II produced unprecedented economic growth throughout the state. After the war, the state and the nation continued to prosper because of the baby boom and the explosion of the consumer culture. The war decimated the infrastructure of several of the former industrial powers such as England and Germany. The United States capitalized on their inability to manufacture and increased exports to other countries. This economic boom gave Americans more discretionary income that allowed them to purchase new household items such as vacuums, washing machines and televisions. To stimulate the sales of items, retailers offered installment credit to consumers with high interest rates. Years of legislation protected the interest of big business and failed to hold big business accountable to standards and quality in production.

California was unique because business was largely unregulated and the state operated like an island economically. The infusion of federal funds during the war kick started decades of industrial and agricultural growth.⁴⁷² In the postwar years, California grew into a global economy.⁴⁷³ The state did not rely on interstate commerce, which was detrimental to California consumers because federal guidelines only pertained to interstate commerce. According to the law, as long as items were manufactured in California and sold in California or outside of the country the federal government had no jurisdiction. However, the enormous growth manufacturing within the state created a plethora of problems and

⁴⁷² Some scholars argued military spending in the state created a welfare state in California, however in the decades after the war the state continued to thrive. However, the state benefitted from military spending.

⁴⁷³ Kevin Starr, *Golden Dreams: California in an Age of Abundance, 1950-1963* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Governor Brown advocated for state intervention to protect consumer and would allow for continued economic growth.

The Creation of the CAC

Another facet of the consumer protection movement was to protect individuals who lived below the poverty line. In the 1960s, intellectuals and politicians discovered the prevalence of poverty in the United States and were surprised by the number of Americans living in poverty.⁴⁷⁴ The lack of consumer protections and the increasing number of individuals living in poverty was alarming to Governor Brown. Brown wanted to protect consumers from unsafe products and prevent the economic exploitation of the lower classes. When Governor Brown ran for office he knew he wanted to create an office dedicated to consumer interests. New York already had such an office and Brown sent George Brunn, an attorney, to New York to study the office's operations and procedures. Brunn formulated a short-term plan for organizing consumer, but found that California had unique problems due to the size of the state. He recommended the committee focus on issues of packaging and weights in their first year and the development of exhibits and lectures.⁴⁷⁵ After Brown took office, he petitioned the legislature to establish the committee by statute in 1959. Despite strong opposition by business lobbyist, the state legislature approved the committee. Governor Brown needed someone highly educated and dedicated to consumer's rights to run the counsel. He found that person in Helen Ewing Nelson who became one of the founders of the consumer

⁴⁷⁴ There are several works that discuss the emergence of awareness of poverty. One of the best works covering this is Michael Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: America's Enduring Confrontation with Poverty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴⁷⁵ George Brunn, "Problems of Organizing Consumers."

http://www.consumerinterests.org/assets/docs/CIA/CIA1962/1962_brunn.pdf

movement.⁴⁶⁹

Nelson was born in 1913 on a small farm near Boulder, Colorado. She grew up with four other brothers and she worked hard on the farm and in school. In 1931, she went to the University of Colorado and studied economics. Nelson knew she studied money and banking at a unique time banking because the government was in the midst of creating institutions to shore up the banking systems.⁴⁷⁶ She graduated from university and moved to California with her husband. She worked in a variety of positions as an economist, but just prior to her appointment to the Consumer Counsel she worked in the State Department of Industrial Relations in the Division of Labor Statistics and Research as a statistician and research economist. In her work with the Department of Industrial Relations, she became acquainted with labor union leaders and management leaders. Nelson used her position to develop a program that provided interested parties in negotiation labor and management with prevailing practices in an area or an industry, which made her acutely aware of these practices. She also surveyed the cost of living of both single workingmen and women and compared these wages to what their minimum required expenditures would be for each month.⁴⁷⁷

When Brown was searching for someone to head the counsel, Nelson just happened to be looking for work in Sacramento. Her husband received a promotion at the Department of Rehabilitation, which required them to relocate from San Francisco to Sacramento. Nelson heard through the grapevine that Brown was open to hiring a female for the position and she worked to get an appointment with Governor Brown. She asked for help from some

⁴⁷⁶ Nelson, "The First Consumer Counsel in California, 1.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid, 2.

of the connections she had made while working in the State Department of Industrial Relations. She solicited support from labor union leaders, people in management, and from the American Association of University Women.⁴⁷⁸ Governor Brown hired Persia Campbell, an economist, to help him choose the candidate. Campbell conducted the preliminary interviews, which included interviews with the candidates and their husbands. One of the questions Campbell asked Nelson's husband was whether or not his wife could make a pie.⁴⁷⁹ However, most of Campbell's questions were aimed at finding out Nelson's qualifications and if she had a clear concept of the consumer in the market economy. By the time Governor Brown finally interviewed Nelson, he had heard from many of her "friends" who supported her appointment to the committee. Brown was impressed with Nelson and chose her to lead the office and made her the official voice of the consumer. She began in 1962 and the legislature assigned her division \$25,000; the committee started out with a small staff and had only one secretary and a legislative charge.

Despite their meager budget and staff, the Consumers Advisory Committee (CAC) had the enormous responsibility of protecting consumers. The CAC was tasked with three main agendas: helping consumers protect themselves through information and education, seeking better consumer protection laws and better enforcement of existing laws, and building a better dialogue between consumers and businessmen. They were supposed to serve as the eyes and ears for the governor and advise him whenever there were matters affecting the interests of the people as consumers. They also made recommendations to the Governor and State Congress on issues they deemed necessary to protect and promote the

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid, 3.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid, 4. Helen noted this in her interview but she praised the work of Persia Campbell and did not feel this question was aimed at diminishing her qualifications.

interest of the consumer. The CAC studied consumer problems within the state and presented their findings to the governmental commissions, departments, and agencies.⁴⁸⁰ They were responsible for reporting on everything from make-up to automobiles. Given the size of the committee they struggled to keep up with their assignments but they pushed to use the CAC as a platform to curtail exploitative practices that harmed the consumer.

During the first few years, Nelson found that Governor Brown was very receptive to the CAC. His door was open to Nelson and he responded to her concerns and requests. In addition, when citizens had complaints she found that the he was willing to listen to their grievances. Governor Brown's wife, Bernice also was invested in the consumer movement. She was particularly concerned with retailers that offered revolving credit charge accounts. With revolving credit charge accounts, consumers had lines of credit they used within a store but unless the entire amount was paid within the grace period consumers paid high interests rates. On several occasions Mrs. Brown attempted to embarrass the Retailers Association. For example, she often sent the CAC bills she received from department stores and in one instance she sent Nelson a bill where the department store added 1 ½ percent interest to her bill before she was even out of the store. Mrs. Brown used to tell Nelson, "When you get home from a short trip, grab a pen and pay the bill before you take off your hat."⁴⁸¹ In 1963, Governor Brown submitted a proposal for a "Consumer Policy for California," that outlined recommendations for action in four major areas: credit, packaging and labeling, services consumers purchased, and deceptive practices.

⁴⁸⁰ "California Woman Appointed to Consumers Advisory Committee," *Daily Defender*, August 13, 1962, 14.

⁴⁸¹ Canson, "Waging the War," 21.

During their first full year of operation the CAC gave over thirty presentations before legislative committees to support the passage of legislation that protected consumers. They successfully lobbied to get legislation passed that outlawed lifetime contracts for health and dance studio contracts. The CAC introduced limits to the amount collected on the terms these contracts so consumers did not get charged exorbitant amounts. They also succeeded in getting children's stuffed and padded toys under the surveillance of the state and ensured the stuffing materials in children's toys were clean, sanitary and free of contamination.⁴⁸²

Unfortunately, the committee struggled to protect consumer's interests because they could not match the power of big lobbyists and they lacked the power of enforcement. Initially, the CAC had no power of enforcement and no subpoena power so Nelson reached out to Attorney General Stanley Mosk for assistance. Nelson had a good relationship with Mosk and she discussed the CAC had particularly the issues they had with powers of enforcement. Mosk offered her a solution and told her very quietly to use their office for enforcement and subpoena power. Nelson used his office for a while and eventually they were able to create a Consumer Fraud Division (CFD), which was equipped with the necessary powers.⁴⁸³ Mosk supported the CFD and his office worked in close collaboration with the division. The CFD provided the legal backing the CAC needed and they also held training sessions with law enforcement agencies to inform them about the role of law enforcement had in curtailing consumer fraud.

⁴⁸² Nelson, "The First Consumer Counsel in California," 38.

⁴⁸³ Ibid, 42.

Fighting Against Big Business

Nevertheless, the CAC still struggled to match the power of big lobbyist. They attempted to get bills passed through the legislature and found their efforts stymied by big business. The CAC had their greatest difficulties battling lobbyists over bills concerning public health. Within the legislature the Committee on Public Health heard most of the public health bills. The CAC attempted to get several bills passed that were aimed at improving child safety in the home and controlling toxic substances and cleaning agents. However, the CAC had a hard time getting these bills passed because lobbyists pressured people that sat on the committee. When the Committee on Public Health met it was a common practice for the chairmen of the committee to place the CAC's bill at the bottom of the agenda if he saw women in the audience. The committee knew that the women had young children and they could not stay until five o'clock. Moreover, the committee took often took their lunch breaks with drug manufacturers and then reconvened for hearings. By the time the bill was finally called to the floor, it was later in the afternoon and the committee counted on the women being gone.

Despite their efforts to silence the voice of women, the CAC continued to organize women to appear as witnesses before the legislature. To help with this process, Nelson hired a public information officer, Jane Dachtelberg. Dachtelberg worked on researching the various topics they were addressing and wrote extensive press releases that drew the public's attention to egregious practices or faulty products. She was known for her enthusiasm and ability to show how issues impacted women and consumers. However, the CAC found the task of recruitment was surprisingly easy because people wanted to get involved. Nelson remarked, "So a lot of young, and older women too, got a good deal of

self fulfillment out of that period of time, because they were doing something that they believed in. And they could do it in addition to being good mothers.”⁴⁸⁴ By and large, the core of the group consisted of educated women who were raising small children. Nelson also increased advocacy for the group by giving thirty to forty speeches, and appeared on television, on the radio and in the newspapers. She was also able to get a larger budget each year and the CAC funds increased to \$65,000 in its second year and increased to \$125,000 by her resignation.⁴⁸⁵

One of the major issues the CAC tackled was the cosmetics industry and manufacturers of household cleaning products in California. The Food and Drug Administration could not restrict or investigate any cosmetic that was produced in California and sold in California. The national standards for laws changed in 1960 when the Food and Drug Administration passed the Federal Hazardous Labeling Act, which required warning labels on everything from household cleaning products to kerosene. The cosmetic industry within the Golden State had grown considerably and cosmetic companies had tapped into a new demographic for sales-teenagers. The CAC received numerous complaints from people who suffered from serious side effects after using cosmetics. For example, the CAC discovered mercury was used as a preservative in lotions. They also received complaints from people about products not delivering on what they promised. For example, there were many skin lotions and emollients that promised consumers younger looking skin but in actuality they burned the user’s face and cause severe damage. The CAC wanted cosmetics and household products to be held more accountable for the types of ingredients they used in their products. They also requested legislation that would require

⁴⁸⁴ Nelson, “The First Consumer Counsel in California,” 20.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid, 22.

companies to fully disclose all of the chemicals and ingredients they used in their products. The CAC found an ally in their fight against cosmetic companies with the Parents and Teachers Association. The PTA decided to get involved because they wanted to protect the health of young people and saw the impact of the products upon teens.⁴⁸⁶ Nelson traveled throughout the state and gave talks about the dangers of cosmetics and other household products. At one particular talk at the YWCA in Pasadena and she told the audience, “At the present time it is possible for you or I to mix up something in our bathtubs and put it on the market, carrying on at least until we are sued.”⁴⁸⁷

In 1961, they successfully lobbied the state legislature to design a tougher cosmetics law. Senator Fred Farr stood behind the CAC and introduced the bill. Farr was a member of the California Commission on Uniform State Laws, which covered a plethora of issues, but one area they looked at was creating uniform commercial code. He believed that California’s law should conform to federal legislation.⁴⁸⁸ The cosmetic law outlawed the adulteration, misbranding, and false advertisement of cosmetics. It also permitted officials to enter and inspect cosmetic companies. In addition, the bill covered any household substance that could be dangerous to a small child such as paint thinner, oven cleaner and dishwasher detergent.⁴⁸⁹ The bill in effect raised the state laws to match the federal standard.⁴⁹⁰ The bill passed the assembly by a 60-1 vote and was signed into law by Governor Brown.

⁴⁸⁶ Nelson, “The First Consumer Counsel in California,” 38.

⁴⁸⁷ “Counsel Head Backs Consumer Label Laws,” *The Pasadena Independent*, February 4, 1961, 2.

⁴⁸⁸ Frederick S. Farr, Oral History Interview, Conducted by Ann Lage, October 9, 1987, Regional Oral History Office, University of California, Berkeley, 81. It should be noted Farr had a long career in California and was considered a pioneer of the modern conservation movement.

⁴⁸⁹ “Counsel Head Backs Consumer Label Laws,” *The Pasadena Independent*, February 4, 1961, 2.

⁴⁹⁰ “Tough Cosmetics Proposal Approved,” *Daily Independent Journal*, June 14, 1961, 1.

Canson's Work in the CAC

The CAC operated for a few years under Nelson and each year their budget, which enabled them to hire more people and expand their activities. As the CAC grew, Nelson wanted a person on the counsel who could address consumer rights in the area of credit and retail sales. In 1965, Canson joined the CAC and she focused her attention on controlling access to credit, decreasing fraudulent selling practices and informing consumers about their rights in the area of contract sales and installment plans. Canson had a great deal of knowledge in the area of consumer education and advocacy because of her experience in the credit union. She took the position because she wanted to expand her own goal of informing and protecting consumers from egregious consumer practices.

For Canson, consumer protection dovetailed with the goals of the civil rights because consumer protections were needed to prevent the exploitation of the poor and minorities. During the 1960s, several civil rights leaders throughout the nation recognized that an integral part of racial justice was economic freedom. In addition, leaders such as A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, and Martin Luther King, Jr. linked the goal of racial justice for blacks with the economic justice for all Americans. In 1966, A. Philip Randolph built off of the momentum of March on Washington movements seeking freedom and employment and proposed “ A Freedom Budget for All Americans.” Under the “Freedom Budget”, Randolph called for the end of poverty in the United States within ten years.⁴⁹¹

Randolph wrote:

There is an absolute analogy between the crusade for civil rights and liberties and the crusade, which the "Freedom Budget" represents. This is because the "Freedom Budget" would achieve the freedom from economic want and oppression that is the

⁴⁹¹ Andrew Edmund Kersten, *A. Philip Randolph: A Life in the Vanguard* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 157.

necessary complement to freedom from political and civil oppression. And just as the progress thus far made on the front of civil rights and liberties has immeasurably strengthened the entire American political democracy, so will the "Freedom Budget" strengthen immeasurably our entire economic and social fabric.⁴⁹²

Canson and other race leaders understood the connection between economic justice and racial justice. For her, economic justice was necessary for ensuring that all minorities and those of the lower classes had access to pathways for social and political autonomy. She wanted to use her position in the CAC to highlight the complications facing the minority and low-income consumer. She had seen how these challenges left individuals vulnerable to unethical business practices and left them economically crippled. Due to her experiences with members of the credit unions, Canson was aware of the business practices of retailers and large corporations and wanted to create a safe and equitable economic market for all consumers and focused on tackling deceptive consumer practices.

One of the first areas Canson addressed was the implementation of stricter regulations on door-to-door sales. Door-to-door salespersons brought products to the doorsteps of consumers and used sales tactics to pressure buyers into purchasing products or services that they would not have otherwise purchased. The laws pertaining to door-to-door salesmen were aimed at protecting the terms of the contract. The consumer was held liable to the terms of the contract even when the services or products rendered were inconsistent with what was promised to the consumer. Canson discovered through the hundreds of complaints she received about door-to-door salesman that consumers were more susceptible within their own homes and these salesman took advantage of their

⁴⁹² A. Philip Randolph Institute, "A Freedom Budget for All Americans: Budgeting Our Resources, 1966-1975 to Achieve Freedom from Want" (New York: A. Philip Randolph Institute, 1966), 19-20.

vulnerability.⁴⁹³ In her own studies she found that door-to-door salesmen were generally from outside of the community, “These people generally work from out of town companies... Strangely enough they always head for the neighborhoods of the poor.”⁴⁹⁴ She looked for ways to guarantee the techniques used protected the purchaser and was less predatory in nature. Canson also wanted contracts to have clear terms so purchasers could understand the terms of the agreements they signed.

Prior to Canson’s involvement, door-to door salespersons could sell goods and services with contracts rendered between the seller and the purchaser. Traveling salespeople tricked consumers into signing poorly worded contracts. Purchasers had difficulty understanding the terms of the contract and salesmen explained the contracts in oversimplistic language and purposely left out the exact amount of interest or monthly payments they were responsible for. They often pretended to befriend the buyer and used tactics that duped the buyer. In addition, many door-to door salespersons sold their contracts to other companies after the buyer signed. Companies that bought the contracts could change the term limits and charge higher interest rates. This practice essentially nullified the salesperson from any responsibility in the sale and left the buyer in a vulnerable position.

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Canson lobbied for tighter legislation to control the tactics used in door-to door sales. The first major change modified the terms of the contract and established a ceiling on interest rates. The terms now required the seller had to provide a signed copy of the contract to the buyer within a certain number of days and included the cost of the item or service. If

⁴⁹³ Walter A. Friedman, *Birth of a Salesman: The Transformation of Selling in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

⁴⁹⁴ Virna Canson, “Silver Lining: Hail to the Sherriff,” *Sacramento Observer*, July 8, 1964, Found in NAACP-WC, Box 43, Folder 24.

⁴⁹⁵ Canson, “Silver Lining: Hail to the Sherriff.”

the seller did not receive a contract with their signature after the sale, the sale was voided and the buyer was not responsible for any further charges. In addition, she pushed to get the law changed to where the terms of the contract could not change even if an outside company purchased the contract after the sale. Canson also reached out to local jurisdictions and sought their help in enforcing new laws. For example, she worked with Sherriff John Misterly in Sacramento and they decided one of the best ways to help enforce the laws was by controlling the number of licenses issued to door-to door salesmen. Sherriff Misterly agreed to limit licenses because in his own investigation they discovered salesmen were using sales methods that deceived the buyers. In Sacramento, companies employed young boys and girls and sales techniques that were deceitful to buyers. Misterly said, “The sales techniques included using people with physical disabilities and young boys and girls who pleaded with customers to purchase products because that they were working their way through school.”⁴⁹⁶ In order to limit these practices, door-to –door salespersons had to apply for their licenses in person and they cut down on the number of licenses they issued.

Canson also lobbied to improve laws regarding repossessions. Repossession laws gave the seller an unusual amount of power and did not protect the consumer. Customers who failed to make their payments were considered in default and sellers were allowed to repossess the property. Moreover, the buyer was still required to pay off the remaining amount they owed on their contract but they were not entitled to possession of the property. Canson petitioned to modify the law and require terms that were more balanced for both the seller and the buyer. The seller still had the right to repossession, but they were no longer allowed to collect the remainder owed on the contract. Companies were given the choice of

⁴⁹⁶ Canson, “Silver Lining.”

whether or not they wanted to repossess or collect the amount owed on the product or service, but they could not do both.⁴⁹⁷

To provide safer alternatives to consumers, Canson proposed the establishment of buying clubs throughout the state for low-income consumers. In the mid 1800s, buying clubs emerged in the U.S. and were a part of a larger cooperative movement. These clubs operated under the same principles of credit unions where members owned, purchased, sold, and worked in the buying club as a collective. Some buying clubs charged members a monthly fee but they strove to keep costs low and ran as non-profit organizations. Buying clubs were popular within the black community because they were founded on the principle of mutual aid. During segregation, buying clubs allowed blacks to shop in an environment free from economic racial discrimination. Cooperatives appealed to black communities because they gave blacks autonomy from the white controlled economic market. Furthermore, cooperatives were base on producing a “double bottom line”, which paid attention to good business practices and required member and community participation.⁴⁹⁸

Buying clubs were extremely popular in California in the 1960s because of an increasing awareness of the hidden dangers in foods and the desire to control the process of purchasing foods. The agricultural boom also came with an environmental cost and people found out about the use of dangerous pesticides used to grow produce. In 1962, Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* informed people about both the usage and prevalence of pesticides, particularly DDT, in their food. She noted the dangers of these chemicals upon the human body. She documented the increased use of pesticides from the 1940s to the 1960s and

⁴⁹⁷ Virna Canson, “Outline of Consumer Protections,” Box 44, Folder 23. NAACP-WC Collection.

⁴⁹⁸ This dissertation is utilizing a definition of “double-bottom line” as defined by Jessica Gordon Nembard in her work *Collective Courage*, 4.

discovered scientists were unsure about safe levels of these substances. People throughout the nation were alarmed by her findings and were proactive in creating their own solutions.⁴⁹⁹ In addition, many environmentalists and activists noted the harmful impact industrial farming had in producing poor qualities in food.⁵⁰⁰ Many buying clubs became a part of a larger movement that advocated for consumer legislation, accurate product labeling, and environmental protection.

People were increasingly concerned about what was actually in their food and where their food came from, without the excessive packaging and confusing measurements. Buying clubs gave people the power to know what they were buying, how much they were buying, and many stocked locally grown produce. They were able to offer members lower prices on goods because they united together to buy goods directly from producers and members worked in the store to keep costs low.⁵⁰¹ Buying clubs were particularly appealing to families from the working and lower classes because food costs were increasing. The larger supermarkets, which offered lower prices, chose not to move into lower-income areas and residents were stuck with smaller supermarkets that often charged exorbitant prices for product of inferior quality. Buying clubs offered an alternative to local stores and allowed for the low-income consumer to be in control of the purchasing process.

In order to start buying clubs, Canson reached out to other co-operatives in the state and asked for their help in buying clubs in low-income neighborhoods. For example, she worked with the Bay Area Neighborhood Development Group, which was a spin off of the co-operative moment in Berkeley to establish a cooperative in Hunter's Point. She also

⁴⁹⁹ Anne Meis Knupfer, *Food Co-ops in America: Communities, Consumption and Economic Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 131-132.

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 1.

⁵⁰¹ John Curl, *For all the People: Uncovering the Hidden History of Cooperation Movements, and Communalism in America* (Oakland, CAA: PM Press, 2009), 53.

worked with Mary Hall, from the Agricultural Extension at the University of California, to establish a consumer group in East Oakland. She used this connection to expand upon these coops and organized several buying clubs throughout the Central Valley. These buying clubs were not connected to the NAACP but were a part of a larger initiative through the state government to address the needs of all low-income consumers. In addition to buying clubs, Canson also met with groups throughout the state and led discussions about adding consumer components to their anti-poverty programs. Through her interactions she helped with the establishment of buying clubs, credit unions, and consumer education programs.⁵⁰²

Bringing the Consumer Movement to Watts

In August of 1965, Canson was reassigned from Sacramento to Los Angeles to work as a credit union specialist for the California State Office of Economic Opportunity. During the first weeks of August, she went to a civil rights and economics conference at the White House. She attended a civil rights conference in the beginning of the month at the White House and she was to return to Sacramento at the end of the conference. During her attendance at the conference she witnessed a historic moment when President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law. However, she received an urgent call from Governor Brown requesting she change her return flight from Sacramento to Los Angeles. While she was in Washington, D.C., Watts, a section of South Los Angeles, exploded into a scene of violence and destruction. Canson watched television coverage of the Watts Rebellion and saw burning buildings, looting, and armed guards attempting to restore order. From the media portrayals of the event she thought the Watts Rebellion was caused by the eruption of

⁵⁰² Canson, "Waging the War," 44.

racial tensions sparked by the arrest of Marquette Frye. On August 11th of 1965 the police pulled over Marquette Frye, who was 21 years old, because they suspected he was intoxicated. Frye failed the sobriety test and was arrested. His brother, Ronald, left the scene to get his mother so she could claim the car. When his mother arrived upon the scene she was shocked to see her son in handcuffs and fought with the arresting officers. An officer took out his baton and struck Frye on the head and in the end all three were placed in police custody.⁵⁰³

By the time of their arrest, hundreds of angry residents had gathered around the officers. They believed the cops used unnecessary force in the arrest of the three. Within a few minutes, twenty five to thirty police cars came into the neighborhood with blaring sirens more residents came outside to see what the commotion was about. The large presence of police and the arrests struck a nerve with the community that was already tired of police brutality and residents began to riot. The rebellion did not end until 14,000 National Guard troops were sent in to quell the violence. By the end, there were 34 people killed, 1,032 injuries and the estimated property damage was well over \$40 million. More than 600 buildings were damaged and 200 were totally destroyed.⁵⁰⁴ The media portrayed the rebellion as thousands of lawless hooligans who were set on pillaging and burning the entire area.

The Golden State was shocked by the melee and the riots occurred at a moment when the state was willing to give money to silence the violence. Canson remarked, “The

⁵⁰³ An interesting side note on the Frye family was they were all from Lima, Oklahoma a town that started as an all-black town and had a strong black political tradition.

⁵⁰⁴ 144 Hours in August 1965, McCone Commission Report. For more on the Watts’ Rebellion please see: Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995); Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

riot had really shaken the area up, the images of the burning city were seen throughout the United States and world.”⁵⁰⁵ Governor Brown sent Canson to Watts to help rebuild Watts and plan and operate the state’s experimental service center program. Canson and Nelson were the first two representatives from any state agency to enter Watts. As they entered Watts, neither of them felt threatened because they had worked with the community before and knew individuals within Watts.⁵⁰⁶

Canson’s first task was locating a site to establish a multi-service center in Watts. She chose a location on 103rd and South Central, which was formerly a saving and loan office owned by then Assemblymen F. Douglas Ferrell. She convinced Dr. Paul O’Rourke, Governor Brown’s special assistant for poverty planning, and the governor’s office that this was an ideal location because of the easy access it provided for minority residents in Watts and the size of the building was ample enough to house the service center. The service center was the first of its kind in the state. The multi-service center’s purpose was to construct a site where residents could come to receive advice and legal counsel in a number of areas. Canson knew in order to rebuild the neighborhood they needed to focus their work on making sure the voice of poor and the neighborhood were heard.

Canson formulated a plan for operating the center and worked to pinpoint the specific issues Watts’ residents had with businesses. She discovered residents were frustrated by businesses that exploited consumers with high prices and interest rates.⁵⁰⁷ Canson knew the one area they had to address was offering economic solutions and education to poor consumers. They came up with the idea of a SWAP shop. The SWAP

⁵⁰⁵ Canson, “Waging the War,” 24.

⁵⁰⁶ Nelson, “The First Consumer Counsel,” 46.

⁵⁰⁷ Canson, “Waging the War,” 41.

shop was a meeting site where residents came and met with experts who helped them deal with the concerns of education, police protection, health, welfare, and consumer education. The first Swap Shop was held in July of 1965 just one month after the Watts Rebellion.⁵⁰⁸

When Canson surveyed the patterns of destruction she believed the Watts Rebellion was more than a racial revolt but was the first real consumer revolt.⁵⁰⁹ She studied the McCone Commission report and the map of the businesses burned, and found a pattern. The McCone Commission noted rioters concentrated on food markets, liquor stores, furniture stores, clothing stores, department stores and pawnshops. She stated, “My own feeling is that it was a consumer revolt. If it had just been a revolt- they would have burned everything but they were selected. They selected this pawnshop here. They selected this market here. They would hop over here and go three or four blocks and burn this and not that. It was a real statement—whether or not anybody has ever stated it that way.” Businessmen who exploited the customer were targeted and other businesses that treated customers with fair practices were left untouched. In one block the Urban League’s Watts project was the only unburned building left in a block.⁵¹⁰ She believed the Watts Rebellion was as much a consumer revolt as it was a racial revolt.

One of the major issues she needed to address was pawnshops exploitation of their customers and those who pawned items. The pawnshops that were looted, destroyed, and burned recovered their losses through insurance companies. However, these businesses failed to reimburse individuals for the items they pawned in the shop.⁵¹¹ She worked as a mediator between the pawnshop owners and those who pawned items to work out financial

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid, 25.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid, 6.3751:71

⁵¹⁰ Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (Charlottesville, VA: The University Press of Virginia, 1995), 99.

⁵¹¹ Virna Canson, “Annual Report 1965 to NAACP,” Box 44, Folder 3, NAACP-WC Collection.

restitution for the items lost in the destruction. In addition, she wanted to address the central issue of why pawnshops were targeted by looters. She found the pawnshops charged extremely high interest rates, which led to people losing their pawned items. She wanted the state government to deal intervene and control these practices. However, she realized she needed to work the system and the most effective testimony before the legislature came from the people affected by the processes. Canson got a white welfare recipient to testify about her experiences of pawning an item for five dollars to buy milk. Under the terms of legislation, the ten-dollar loan she received from the pawnshop cost her five dollars in interest for a three-week period and led to her paying \$15 for a gallon of milk.⁵¹²

After the riots, the Bureau of Labor Statistics requested a survey of six cities, including Los Angeles County, Chicago, New York, and Washington that compared the cost of living between the lower and upper classes. One aspect, the survey focused on was comparing food prices. There were concerns that low-income families paid more than other individuals for the same products and the study wanted to compare the prices of foods in low-income and high-income neighborhoods. They collected eighteen food items that were considered in the expenditure patterns of low-income families; these included flour, bread, steak, ground beef, bacon, chicken, fresh milk, evaporated milk, eggs, margarine, lettuce, potatoes, canned pears, sugar, and coffee. They discovered there were significant differences in prices caused by the types of stores located in low-income and higher income areas. In low-income areas there were more small independent stores that tended to charge higher prices than larger independent stores or chain stores. Chain stores were less likely to open in lower economic areas because they were weary of opening in these areas.

⁵¹² Canson, "Waging the War," 33.

There were far fewer chain stores and supermarkets located in low-income neighborhoods and shoppers in these areas paid higher prices in smaller grocery stores. In part this was due to the evolution of the supermarket that coincided with the growth of the suburbs. Supermarkets became fixtures in the development of shopping centers that gave shoppers access to quick and easy shopping. Larger supermarkets utilized mass distribution systems that helped keep prices low.⁵¹³ However, supermarket chains were hesitant to expand their stores into economically depressed urban centers. This left smaller neighborhood stores as the only option for consumers. In addition, the study discovered larger grocery store chains did not have credit lines or offer free delivery for groceries. Consumers with limited means relied on lines of credit and access to free delivery. Therefore, even when cheaper options were available in other stores the consumer was more likely to go to a smaller neighborhood store because these stores were more willing to extend lines of credit, which contributed to paying higher prices over time.⁵¹⁴ In addition, low-income consumers had less money for their shopping trips so this led to purchasing smaller quantities of food, which made food cost higher.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics also discovered the packaging of products made it challenging for the consumer to decipher the actual prices of items at grocery stores. Moreover, grocery stores transformed drastically within a few years and consumers were ill equipped to deal with these changes. In the 1930s, smaller grocery stores shifted to self-service markets, where buyers no longer requested items from the grocer but they had to choose items from the shelves. The ways in which foods were packaged also changed

⁵¹³ Richard W. Lonstreth, *The Drive In, The Supermarket, and the Transformation of Commercial Space in Los Angeles, 1914-1941* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 78.

⁵¹⁴ Family Economics Review, Consumer and Food Economics Research Division, Agricultural Research Service, United States Department of Agriculture, September 1966, 17.

considerably within a short period of time and left the consumer guessing about the quality and quantity of the products. Additionally, new companies saw the potential for making more profit and rushed into the business of packaging, processing and distributing foods and produced poor products.⁵¹⁵ The technological revolution in the food packaging industry forced people to rely on the package to provide accurate information about the contents of the package.

After looking at the Bureau of Labor Statistics' findings, Nelson and Canson were disturbed by what appeared to be deceptive practices by food manufactures on package sizing and price, which confused buyers. In 1966, the NAACP hosted a conference on consumer rights at the Asimolar Convention. They invited Esther Peterson, special assistant to the President for consumer affairs, to speak at the conference and Peterson's speech galvanized the attendees. Peterson told the crowd, "Equality in the market place belongs right beside equality in housing, in job opportunity and in the polling booth."⁵¹⁶ Spurred on by the conference, several of the attendees and conference organizers organized a steering committee to investigate fraudulent practices. The steering committee blossomed and became the Association of California Consumers (ACC). Within their first year, the ACC worked on the problem of truth and measurement in food items and conducted tests to study consumer concerns within grocery stores. One such test asked five college-educated women to buy seventeen different common household groceries, such as rice and peanut butter, and to purchase the most economical product based on weight and price per ounce. They also recorded the length of time each shopper took during their shopping trip. The ACC

⁵¹⁵ Laura Shapiro, *Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America* (New York: Viking, 2004) 23

⁵¹⁶ Esther Peterson quoted in, "Protecting the Poor Consumer" *The Crisis*, (Aug/Sept. 1966).

concluded the shoppers spent too much time attempting to decipher the prices, far more than the average consumer would, and still failed to make the most economical purchase.⁵¹⁷

From the ACC's findings, Canson and Nelson determined they needed to start workshops that focused on educating consumers about price comparisons and the actual costs of food. They wanted to reach the greatest number of participants so they held the workshops in churches on Saturdays. Hundreds of women throughout the area attended the meetings. In the workshops, they taught consumers how to decipher labels and translate the cost per ounce to the actual cost of the product. After one meeting a participant remarked, "I am so glad it wasn't just me, I just thought I was dumb. I thought everyone else could do it."⁵¹⁸ The classes were not only important for low-income consumers, but also attracted women from the middle classes who struggled with deciphering prices and packaging in the market place.

In addition to educating consumers, Canson worked for a year in Watts creating other avenues for economic growth. One of her biggest accomplishments in Watts was establishing a credit union. She worked with Dr. O'Rourke, from the California Credit Union League, to get the approval for a small grant from the league to help with the founding of the credit union in Watts. Canson saw some similarities between the issues that faced black Sacramentans and those in the Watts community. Those who lived in Watts were victims of individuals who took advantage of their economic position and effectively relegated blacks to second-class citizens. Pawnbrokers preyed upon the economic weakness of those who pawned items and banked on them paying high interest rates to retrieve their items. The process of suburbanization left people with limited means stuck in an urban

⁵¹⁷ Nelson, "The First Consumer Counsel," 41.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid, 38.

environment where they paid higher prices on goods and services. Canson knew they needed to create an economic base free from deceptive practices. She gathered several leaders from within the community and devised a plan for starting a credit union. After years of experience in establishing credit unions she knew had to hold informal sessions about the functions of the credit union in order to get members to join the credit union. Within the first few months, the Watts Credit Union membership and had substantial holdings.⁵¹⁹

An essential component to rebuilding Watt's was the War on Poverty funds. The Neighborhood Participation Project (NAPP) was founded in 1965 and funded by the Office of Economic Opportunity's Community Action Program. The program provided training and employment opportunities for adults who bell below the poverty line. In Los Angeles officials started the Economic and Youth Opportunities Agency (EYOA), which managed the grants.⁵²⁰ The NAPP was established four months before the Watts Rebellion but became the grass-roots arm of the war on poverty in Los Angeles. The program was unique because it emphasized citizen participation in the program. Opal Jones directed the program and served as the first executive director. Jones had an extensive background working as a social worker and believed in grassroots community involvement. She moved to Los Angeles from Texas during World War II. Jones worked for years as the head of the Avalon Community Center in South Central Los Angeles. When the NAPP program was

⁵¹⁹ Canson, "Waging the War," 44.

⁵²⁰ Robert Bauman, "Gender, Civil Rights Activism, and the War on Poverty in Los Angeles," in *The War on Poverty: AA New Grassroots History, 1964-1980*, Eds. Annelise Orleck, Lisa Gayle, 213.

first proposed, Jones was opposed to the program because she feared the poor would not have a voice in the programs.⁵²¹

However, the NAPP incorporated community involvement and required active participation by those who benefitted from the program. Jones devised a resourceful program that helped welfare recipients find jobs and provided hands-on training for future jobs. She employed welfare recipients and paid them a flat rate of \$400 a month and placed them within various agencies. They functioned as sort of change agents because they served in positions where they helped others and were able to relate intimately with their position.⁵²² Canson recollected Jones' would say, "You can bring into this situation the experiences of the poor. You can then interpret, to the poor, the agency. Then, hopefully, that process with change."⁵²³ The program was not embraced by everyone and was extremely controversial because she used funds to pay welfare recipients and allowed them to operate as experts in the field. She set up several outposts throughout the area so people had easy access to training and advice. Canson helped in training individuals to provide the training for others. She also worked at several of the outposts herself and offered classes on consumer education and informed people about exploitative practices businesses engaged in.

The Decline of the CAC

At the end of the year, Canson returned to her office in Sacramento and continued to tackle consumer issues. During Governor Brown's tenure as governor, one issue he encountered as time progressed was that Californians were becoming ambivalent about the

⁵²¹ Robert Bauman, "The Neighborhood Adult Participation Project: Black-Brown Strife in the War on Poverty in Los Angeles," in, *The Struggle in Black and Brown: African American and Mexican American* edited by Brian Behnken (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2011).

⁵²² Virna Canson, "Waging the War," 22.

⁵²³ Virna Canson, "Waging the War," 23.

changes that occurred throughout the state. The state witnessed years of turmoil and “native” Californians sought to reclaim their state and take away power from newcomers. The enormous population growth of the state turned into crowded freeways, overpriced homes, and people began to turn against the government involvement. Brown believed that government was essential for the solutions of society’s problems while others like Reagan wanted to see less government involvement in issues that they deemed societal issues not governmental concerns.⁵²⁴ These voices grew louder in the 1966 election and voters called for less governmental control and an end to programs they deemed were private responsibility and outside of the purview of the government.

Ronald Reagan was elected into office in 1967; Canson knew the work of the CAC was more important than ever. She and Nelson believed it was important to keep the office in the public eye. Nelson understood if she vacated her office it would become easier for Reagan to appoint anyone and remove the program. However, Reagan had other plans for the office and moved to downsize the CAC. At five o’clock of the same evening that Reagan took the oath of office, a couple of men dressed in suits delivered a letter to Nelson from Reagan. He did not want Nelson to head the CAC and asked for her immediate resignation. She remembered that as she was moving her stuff out of her office, Reagan’s people were moving in.⁵²⁵ She knew that Reagan would take the office in a new direction and make significant cuts in funding.

The next day, Canson returned to the office after lunch and she was unaware of Nelson’s resignation. When Canson heard Nelson was fired, she submitted her resignation,

⁵²⁴ Ethan Rarick writes about the shift in Brown’s popularity from Brown to Reagan in his work *California Rising: The Life and Times of Pat Brown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

⁵²⁵ Helen Ewing Nelson, 47.

“ As soon as Reagan was voted in as governor knew that would all change. All hell was breaking loose in terms of what they were going to do for the consumer program, because Reagan targeted that one to destroy, and did, in fact, virtually destroy.”⁵²⁶ Reagan did not completely destroy the office but he implemented severe cuts that left the office incapacitated. He took away the autonomy of the office and placed it within the governor’s office. He also slashed the budget from over \$120,000 to a mere \$18,000 and then cut the staff from seven down to two.

Canson and Ewing attempted to lead a charge to preserve the CAC. They lobbied the state legislature and requested the reinstatement of the CAC’s full operating budget. They both believed that Reagan’s cuts to the office left the consumer vulnerable to exploitation by big business. Canson lamented to the papers, “We view the allocation of a mere \$28,000 to sustain such operation as an insult to you and to us.” Reagan stripped the power of office by placing it within the governor’s office, which was a tactic that Canson suspected was purposefully designed to eventually eliminate the CAC. She commented, “ Submerging this activity into a maze of concerns in the governor’s office and placing the importance of this position at the low salary level suggested is a cruel hoax.” They noted the CAC had saved the citizens of California millions of dollars. However, the Republican controlled legislature sided with Reagan and upheld the cuts. Governor Reagan appointed the Republican chairwoman of Contra Costa County, Mrs. Kay Valory to head the CAC. However, both Canson and Nelson believed her only qualification for the job was having six children and a husband.⁵²⁷

⁵²⁶ Virna Canson, “Waging the War,” 26.

⁵²⁷ “Partisan Battle Erupts Over Proposed curtailing of Consumer Counsel,” *The Modesto Bee*, April 4, 1967, A-5.

Work as a Legislative Advocate

When Reagan became governor, Canson remembered, “It was harder to convince people that the more resources that we put at the level of the low- income consumer, the more long term gain we could make.”⁵²⁸ However, even after she resigned, Canson continued to be the voice of consumers in California. She became a legislative lobbyist for the NAACP and worked on petitioning for bills aimed at protecting the interest of consumers. In addition, she fought against the passage of bills that jeopardized consumers. In 1967, she asked Governor Reagan to veto a bill that permitted homes and furniture to be used as security on loans to purchase automobiles. Senate Bill 448, introduced by Senator Gordon Cologne, R-Riverside County, allowed buyers to their homes and furniture to borrow for down payments on autos. Canson called the bill a “hunting license” for car dealers to use in selling automobiles to low income, and unsophisticated buyers.⁵²⁹ Others agreed with Canson, such as Robert Barton, the secretary for the ACC, who charged Cologne’s bill “provides greater protection to unscrupulous car salesmen and the car-financing industry and very little to anyone else.” The bill allowed lenders to seize buyer’s furniture and homes in the event of a default. The bill passed in 1968, but Canson used the occasion to draw attention to the fact that the CAC no longer functioned as an entity to protect the consumer because they failed to address the issue entirely.⁵³⁰ Without the protections offered under the CAC, she claimed that special interests swayed the state’s Capitol.

⁵²⁸ Virna Canson, “Waging the War,” 45.

⁵²⁹ “NAACP Plea Sent to Reagan,” *The Sacramento Bee*, March 25, 1967, 1.

⁵³⁰ Martin Smith, “NAACP Calls Loan Bill ‘License’ For Car Sharks,” *The Fresno Bee*, July 24, 1968, D-8.

In 1969, Assemblyman Walter Powers of Sacramento proposed an amendment to the Unruh Retail Installment Sales Act. The Unruh Retail Installment Act demanded the disclosure of all terms of the installment contract. The Act also required all blank spaces of a contract were filled in before obtaining the buyers signature and that buyers received a legible copy of the contract. The Unruh Act stipulated until the contract was filled out and delivered to the buyer, the buyer was obligated to pay only the cash price, with no interest. The Unruh Act also set ceilings on the maximum service charge and regulated terms for late payments.⁵³¹ Assemblyman Walter Powers of Sacramento sought to amend the Unruh Retail Installment Sales Act to allow for higher interest rates. The bill proposed interest rates on installment contracts to increase by 20 to 50 percent on sales contracts between \$1,000 and \$2,000. She successfully lobbied against the bill and continued to tackle measures that sought to dismantle protections for consumers. The skyrocketing costs were continually escalating for California consumers and she made it her mission to strike these sorts of bills down before they became law.⁵³²

In addition to petitioning for bills, she also lobbied against governmental appointments that would hurt the goals of the NAACP. In 1970, Canson campaigned against the appointment of Lucian Vandegrift as state secretary of Human Relations. Vandegrift was a former Butte County district attorney, who worked for a short time as the Assistant Secretary to Spencer Williams, the first head of the Human Relations Agency. The agency was large and consisted of nine separate state departments including Medical, Social Welfare, Employment, Industrial Relations, and other boards and commissions. The

⁵³¹ Richard D. Sommers, "The Regulation of Vendor Credit: Inconsistencies of California Law," 3 Loyola of Los Angeles Law Review, 134 (1970), Available at: <http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/lr/vol13/iss1/5>.

⁵³² "Sales Contract Interest Raise Might Go Up 50%," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 12, 1969, D5.

agency employed 48,000 persons and had a 3.5 million dollar budget. Reagan believed spending had spiraled out of control on Social Welfare and Medical and he demanded cuts in these areas.⁵³³ Reagan chose Vandergrift to become head of the agency because of his previous work within Butte County where he was known to take a tough stance against welfare recipients. Canson and others testified at the hearing and accused Vandegrift of “persecuting” welfare recipients in Butte County.⁵³⁴ Canson testified that Vandergrift advocated midnight raids of welfare recipients’ homes and made welfare files open to the public.⁵³⁵ She protested his appointment because she claimed Vandergrift was the “antithesis of the type of person who should lead the agency – dealing with the sick, the needy and criminals needing rehabilitation.” Vandergrift denied the accusations and was voted into office with little debate.⁵³⁶

Proposition 14

When Reagan ran for governor he promised to consolidate spending in what he saw as a top-heavy government and pledged to back Proposition 14. The Rumford Act was passed in 1963 and was a fair housing act that banned discrimination in the sale or rental of housing. The Rumford Act also forbade lending institutions, mortgage holders, and real estate brokers from discriminating in housing transactions. As soon as it passed, the California Real Estate Association (CREA) responded with a petition drive to add a

⁵³³ Robert Smith, *Quest: The California Youth Authority’s Golden Years* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2012), 645.

⁵³⁴ “Senate Oks Vandegrift For Human Relations Job,” Sacramento AP McClatchy Newspaper Service, *The Fresno Bee*, July 9, 1970. 7-D.

⁵³⁵ “2 Reagan Selections Under Fire: Education, Human Relations Choices to Be Challenged,” *Independent*, April 15, 1970, 7.

⁵³⁶ Vandergrift only served in the position for a few months and implemented severe cuts in welfare and Medical.

referendum to the Rumford Act, known as Proposition 14. CREA claimed the act threatened private property rights.⁵³⁷ The campaign for Proposition 14 linked the idea of property to freedom and openly expressed segregationist politics encoded in the language of private rights.⁵³⁸ At the same time, the New Right was gaining in momentum in southern California. The New Right was concerned with economic and social issues involving taxes and state spending on matters they deemed as private responsibilities.⁵³⁹ Proponents called for “freedom of choice” and called the act “forced” housing.⁵⁴⁰ Reagan supported Proposition 14 because he alleged the Rumford Open Housing Act interfered with the rights of individuals to dispose of their property in the manner they saw as fit. In a series of campaign speeches, Reagan argued if people wanted to discriminate against blacks they had the right to do so, even though he maintained, “such prejudice is morally wrong.” He also called the Rumford Act an attempt, “to give one-segment of our population rights at the expense of the basic rights of all our citizens.”⁵⁴¹

In 1964 the California Real Estate Association, successfully petitioned to get Proposition Fourteen added to the ballot.⁵⁴² In response, Canson opened an NAACP lobbying center in the Odd Fellows building in Sacramento and trained individuals in how

⁵³⁷ Kurt Schuparra, *Triumph of the Right: The Rise of the California Conservative Movement, 1945-66* (Armonck, N.Y. : ME.E. Sharpe, 1998), 105.

⁵³⁸ Self, *American Babylon*, 176.

⁵³⁹ For more on the emergence of the New Right please see, Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁵⁴⁰ “Facts About Prop. 14 and The Housing Acts,” *Sacramento Bee*, May 30, 1967, 4.

⁵⁴¹ Norman Kempster, “Reagan Seeks Rumford Act Repeal,” *Ukiah Daily Journal*, November 21, 1966, 16.

⁵⁴² “California: Proposition 14,” *Newsweek*, Friday, Sept 25, 1964, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,876158,00.html>, (Accessed March 15, 2011).

to petition against the proposition.⁵⁴³ She was alarmed at the growing racial animosity in the state and wrote in a press release: “ Damning evidence of this deterioration is the recent results of the Gallup Poll, which revealed the Far West outstripped the Deep South by 16% in its opposition to the fair housing provisions of the pending civil rights legislation in the nation’s congress.”⁵⁴⁴ She condemned the real estate industry for their continued attacks and knew preserving the Rumford Act was critical to open housing. However, voters disagreed with Canson and went to the polls and voted for the passage of Prop 14. The measure was passed into law and many civil rights leaders believed Prop 14 signaled the state was only willing to accept so much racial liberalism.⁵⁴⁵ The NAACP and other civil rights organizations fought against Prop 14 and the case was eventually heard in the California Supreme Court, which ruled the measure was unconstitutional. Prop 14 failed in the long run; however, the support for the measure and Reagan’s vocal stance against Rumford indicated California had entered a new political phase and transformed Californian politics. Moreover, open housing laws in the Golden State did not change the racial compositions in most neighborhoods and led to larger issues regarding equality in education.

⁵⁴³ Mary Rourke, “Virna Canson, 81; Activist, Director of NAACP’s 9 State Region,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 21, 2003, <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/apr/21/local/me-canson21>, (Accessed February 3, 2010).

⁵⁴⁴ Virna Canson, Press Release, May 12, 1967, Fol. 10, Box 20, WC NAACP Records.

⁵⁴⁵ Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warrior: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 185.

Chapter 7

“Preserving Our Children: Keeping Opportunities Open for the Next Generation”

“When I was a girl back in Oklahoma attending the segregated public schools our teachers instilled in us a concept that knowledge is power. That teaching of my youth remains with me in my adult years in my work as a civil rights activist.”

-Virna Canson⁵⁴⁶

In 1971, Canson read over an urgent request for legal counsel from a group of frustrated San Francisco parents. In their complaint, they accused the San Francisco Unified School District of discriminating against their children because the school used a culturally biased intelligence test. In 1969, California approved the usage of these tests to assess student’s intellectual abilities and place them within appropriate classrooms. This process, called tracking, also placed children who failed the test in “educable mentally retarded” (E.M.R) classes. However, the parents claimed the test had the sinister effect of placing Black students in E.M.R. classes in alarmingly high rates. According to the parents, the tests violated the Title VII of the Civil Rights Act because their children no longer had equal access to education.⁵⁴⁷ In one of the elementary schools, every single special education class, kindergarten through 5th grade, consisted entirely of black students.⁵⁴⁸ Now, the parents elicited the NAACP-WC's assistance in filing an injunction against the school district, demanding the immediate discontinuation of the test in all state public schools.

Canson shook her head as she read over the request, despite the court’s ruling in *Brown v. Board* and the passage of Civil Rights Acts California continued to face

⁵⁴⁶ Virna Canson, Paper presented to the NAACP-WC Conference 1978, NAACP-WC.

⁵⁴⁷ William Endicott, “Use of IQ Tests in Placing Black Pupils Goes to Trial,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 11, 1977, Box 38, Folder 35, NAACP-WC Collection.

⁵⁴⁸ “Blacks Challenging Cals Use of Tests to Place Remedial Pupils,” *New York Times*, October 12, 1977, Box 40, Folder 11, NAACP-WC Collection.

discriminatory practices, particularly in the educational realm.⁵⁴⁹ Canson understood the importance of the black community establishing their own wealth and how important education was to climbing the economic ladder. Through her experiences with credit unions she knew there were educational gaps in the black community and she also realized access to a quality education was a critical element in moving forward economically. When she took over as Regional Director of the NAACP-WC in 1974, she placed education at the top of her agenda because she believed that the *Brown* decisions, Affirmative Action, and the Golden State's initiatives to correct racial discrimination in education fell short in providing actual gains. Moreover, issues throughout the state showed educational equality still eluded young blacks.

This chapter examines the impact *Brown v. Board* decision impacted northern California and how the court decision failed to create integrated classrooms and educational opportunities. In the Golden State, minorities dedicated years of their lives fighting for equality, rejoiced when the Civil Right Acts passed and believed their hard work had successfully culminated in prying open the doors of economic, employment and educational freedom. However, by the 1970s, unsurprisingly, discrimination persisted and the battle for civil rights continued to smolder. The fire hoses, massive marches, and charismatic speeches of the 1960s disappeared from the headlines in the media, but equal access to employment, housing, and education still eluded the black community. The nation watched television coverage of southerners violently resisting desegregation. However, the South was not the only region with segregated schools and states outside of the South realized

⁵⁴⁹ *Larry P. v. Riles*, United States Court of Appeals, 1984. 793 F.2d 969 (9th Cir.) <http://www.povertylaw.org/poverty-law-library/case/54400/54494/54494a.pdf> (Accessed March 1, 2011).

they had to rectify segregation caused by residential patterns. Similar to the South, there were efforts in California to avoid *Brown* and segregation continued in all of California's urban schools. California leaders realized that *Brown*, the Civil Rights Acts, and Affirmative Action policies failed to transform the real enemy to equal opportunity: white societies failure to accept full integration. This chapter reveals how Canson led the fight against practices that allowed for segregation in schools and implemented her own remedy to exclusionary practices by promoting and fostering the development of ACT-SO.

After *Brown*, civil rights leaders realized they had the legal ammunition they needed to challenge de facto segregation in schools. In addition, black middle-class leaders in Northern California combatted discrimination with techniques they used in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s that combined pursuing legal avenues to achieve integration with ideals of black middle-class respectability, which focused on the development of an independent community. They were acutely aware of society's reluctance to accept racial reforms and knew the passage of civil rights legislation initiated a new phase of activism.⁵⁵⁰ Court decisions and national civil rights legislation opened the doors of educational institutions, but the implementation of these decisions and laws at the grassroots level suggested society resisted racial equality. Moreover, by the 1970s California's political landscape had shifted from embracing civil rights legislation that helped minorities to twisting the language of civil rights legislation to promote their own agenda.

Despite the passage of *Brown v. Board*, de facto segregation still existed in schools all throughout the state. When Canson addressed educational discrepancies in primary and

⁵⁵⁰ Kevin Grant, *A Civilised Savagery: Britain and the New Slaveries in Africa, 1884-1926* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 4. Grant uses this phrase to explain why the work of abolitionists in England continued after emancipation, this phrase eloquently summed up what occurred with the civil rights legislation as well.

secondary education she confronted decades old state policies, which both promoted and maintained segregation within the schools. She knew she faced not only issues of segregation but also long-standing stereotypes about blacks and intelligence. California's legacy with school segregation began, in large part, because the state's settlement pattern created a quilt of races and ethnicities of people who had migrated to the West in search of freedom and opportunity. The passage of *Brown v Board* did not offer states concrete plans of action in dealing with segregation and the process of desegregation in California was a perilous journey.

California's Legacy with School Segregation

The first black leaders in California wanted educational opportunities for their children and parents fought against both legal and extralegal practices of segregation and discrimination. Initially, they created their own schools within churches and homes; however, some black communities lacked the financial resources to provide schools and teachers. For example, in the early 1800s, a group of mothers from the black Sacramentan community successfully lobbied the state for funding.⁵⁵¹ Education received a boost during the Progressive Era when mandatory education became a priority to reformers. Following the national trend, California educators and state lawmakers recognized education went hand-in-hand with the economic development of the state and introduced mandatory education for children from the ages of eight to fourteen. For reformers, the schools became a way for the state to proliferate ideals of Americanism, the Superintendent of the Oakland Public Schools, Fred M. Hunter remarked, "The public schools are a melting pot for all

⁵⁵¹ Covin, *Black Politics*, 17.

classes and races... With the present system of school segregation those in the slum districts are not learning Americanism but only picking up wrong ideas from the riff-raff.”

⁵⁵² One educator remarked education represented the greatest asset a parent could depart to their child and marked a possession “ more valuable than money” that would never fail to yield interest.⁵⁵³

The state implemented mandatory education that required the allocation of taxpayer dollars to build schools and hire teachers. Several California towns and cities erected schools but limited entrance to White students only. In 1869, a series of Jim Crow laws cemented these practices and allowed for segregation in schools. Originally, California’s Jim Crow laws only applied to Native American students, but within a few short years these policies expanded to students of Asian and Mexican descent.⁵⁵⁴ Mandated under California Political Code section 1662, school districts provided a separate school if there more than ten children of African, Mongolian, or Indian descent resided in the area.⁵⁵⁵ These educational laws resulted in three consequences for minority children in California; they were allowed to attend schools with white children, communities erected separate

⁵⁵² “Democracy in the Public Schools is Theme of Lecture to Mothers: Success of American Ideals Still Hanging in the Balance, Declares Oakland Superintendent,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Sept. 14, 1917, Pro Quest Historical Newspapers (Accessed March 4, 2011).

⁵⁵³ B. Stout, “ An Essay on Public Education in California,” February 1866, <http://ia600409.us.archive.org/22/items/essayonpublicedu00stou/essayonpublicedu00stou.pdf>, (Accessed February 28, 2011).

⁵⁵⁴ Thus, the Golden State’s practice of segregation was not only limited to African Americans but also included Native American, Asian American, and Mexican American students. Numerous works have been written on this process a few worthy of mention are: William Bauer, "Family Matters: Round Valley Indian Families at the Sherman Indian Institute, 1900-1945," *Southern California Quarterly* 92:4 (2010): 393-421, argues that Round Valley Indians wanted to attend federal boarding schools because of the segregated schools in Round Valley and the discrimination they faced when some Native students could attend public schools. Martha Menchaca, *The Mexican Outsiders: A Community History of Marginalization and Discrimination in California* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995); Joyce Kuo, “Excluded, Segregated and Forgotten: A Historical View of the Discrimination of Chinese Americans in Public Schools,” *Asian Law Journal*.

⁵⁵⁵ Rudolph Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 182.

institutions for each race, or they were left with not school whatsoever. However, parents were unwilling to accept practices that left their children without education. These parents opposed the political code and filed several of the educational court cases in California that were precursors to the eventual ruling in *Brown v. Board*.⁵⁵⁶

As noted earlier, the parents of Mary Frances Ward challenged the legality of separate schools in San Francisco in 1872.⁵⁵⁷ In the *Ward v. Flood* case, the court pronounced that separate was equal but if a separate school did not exist, children could enter white schools.⁵⁵⁸ Arguably, in 1890, the state Supreme Court decision in *Wysinger v. Crookshank* created the legal basis for desegregation in California.⁵⁵⁹ The court decided if no black school existed, students of African descent had to be admitted into the White school.⁵⁶⁰ This policy remained in place until the Supreme Court heard the 1947 *Mendez v. Westminster* case, which addressed segregation based on language but not by race.⁵⁶¹ The *Mendez* case challenged the legality of *Plessy*, but it did not become *the* case to end segregation nationally. The plaintiffs in the case were described as of Mexican “descent,” which according to U.S. law are legally White.⁵⁶² The Plaintiffs in the case used The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo as their backing for proving they were legally white.

Historian Charles Wollenburg argued Mendez, “was part of a process which stripped away

⁵⁵⁶ Charles Wollenberg, *All Deliberate Speed: Segregation and Exclusion in California Schools, 1855-1975* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 7.

⁵⁵⁷ David Covin, *Black Politics After the Civil Rights Movement: Activity and Beliefs in Sacramento, 1970-2000* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publisher, 2009), 33.

⁵⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 34.

⁵⁵⁹ Kristi Bowman, “The New Face of School Desegregation,” *Duke Law Journal* 50:6 (April 2001), 1770.

⁵⁶⁰ “Colored Children Entitled to Education Privileges on Parity with Whites,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, Jan 28, 1890 found in NAACP-WC Collection.

⁵⁶¹ Bowman, “The New Face Duke Law Journal, 1774, in addition also see, Mark Brilliant’s *The Color of America has Changed* because he also points to this discrepancy in the cases of *Brown v. Board* and *Mendez v. Westminster* in his study.

⁵⁶² *Westminster Sch. Dist. v. Mendez*, 161 F.2d 774, 781 (9th Cir. 1947).

the formal structure of legalized segregation and ex-posed the underlying conditions of racism and reaction that divide the American people and plague their consciences.”⁵⁶³

What Does Brown Do For California?

For nearly sixty years, courts adhered to the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* that created the “separate but equal” doctrine and legally reinforced segregation throughout the South.⁵⁶⁴ However, by 1952 the social and political climate had shifted and opened the doors for the Supreme Court to decide to hear *Brown v. Board of Education*.⁵⁶⁵ In his work, historian Michael Klarman noted, “Between Plessy (1896) and *Brown* (1954), the conventional constitutional sources that were pertinent to the segregation issue did not change.”⁵⁶⁶ The biggest change occurring between the two cases was the growth of grass roots organization and external pressures applied by the NAACP that challenged educational discrepancies created by *Plessy*. The attorneys argued the “separate but equal” doctrine had detrimental educational and psychological effects on children. For nearly a year, the court deliberated on *Brown v. Board* and struggled to come to a decision.

⁵⁶³ Wollenburg, *All Deliberate Speed*, 135.

⁵⁶⁴ In 1896, the Supreme Court ruled in the *Plessy*, that Fourteenth Amendment was not violated as long as there were separate facilities for blacks and whites that the Fourteenth Amendment as long as those facilities were the same. The Court’s ruling became the benchmark for legalized segregation.

⁵⁶⁵ There were a series of court cases that paved the way for *Brown* some of these were *Sipuel v. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma* (1948) where the Court ruled blacks must be admitted to state universities because they had more educational offerings than black institutions. In *Sweatt v. Painter* (1950) the Court ruled that a separate Black law school, established for Sweatt did not have adequate facilities and curriculum. In *Laurin v. Oklahoma State Regent* (1950) the Court ruled that the state violated the separate but equal doctrine when it required isolated cafeteria and classroom seating for Black students because it produced unequal educational opportunities. Unsurprisingly, these court cases occurred in Oklahoma. As noted in the first chapter Oklahoma’s all black towns led to the establishment of a strong black middle class that sought to create their own ideal of citizenship. Several notable works that cover the court cases in Oklahoma are: James Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) and Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America’s Struggle for Equality* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004).

⁵⁶⁶ Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America’s Struggle for Equality* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 448.

By the end of their 1952-1953 term the Justices tabled the case and decided to rehear the case when they reconvened in December. During the court's break, Chief Justice Fred Vinson, from Kentucky, had a heart attack and passed away. His passing opened a position on the bench and paved the way for overturning *Plessy*. President Eisenhower selected the former California Governor, Earl Warren, to the position of Chief Justice. Prior to his appointment, Warren vocalized his support for overturning *Plessy* and his placement on the bench tipped the balance in support of *Brown*.⁵⁶⁷ In 1954, Warren delivered his opinion and stated, " We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal..."⁵⁶⁸ As Chief Justice Warren's words were heard across the nation, civil rights activists celebrated the Supreme Court's ruling on *Brown vs. Board*.⁵⁶⁹

The Court's declaration that segregation in public education was unconstitutional represented the first step in addressing segregation in schools. The Court understood the ruling needed directives to assist in the implementation of *Brown*. They showed their determination to dismantle segregation in the schools when they convened after the ruling

⁵⁶⁷ Thurgood Marshall dedicated thirty years of his life to fight for the desegregation of schools. After the *Brown* ruling he called the Supreme Court ruling the "greatest victory" in the NAACP's history. He thought that schools would be fully integrated in five years, he did not foresee how much local school officials would resist integration and the other methods that schools would devise in order to avoid integration. A few notable works on his life and achievements are Larry Gibson, *Young Thurgood: The Making of a Supreme Court Justice*, (New York: Prometheus Books, 2012) and Kenneth W. Mack, *Representing the Race: The Creation of the Civil Rights Lawyer* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012)

⁵⁶⁸ The *Brown* case itself consisted of five different cases that the Supreme Court consolidated into one singular case under the name of *Brown v. Board of Education*. These five cases that were consolidated were: *Brown vs. Board of Education*, *Briggs v. Elliot*, *Davis v. Board of Education of Prince Edward County (VA.)*, *Bolling v. Sharpe*, and *Gebhart v. Ethel*. These individual cases were all part of the NAACP's larger effort they implemented in 1950 where they would no longer file lawsuits seeking equal educational facilities but only those that were aimed at the integration of schools.

to assist in the process of desegregation. The Supreme Court justices believed local school should formulate their own plans for desegregation because there was no one solution for addressing segregation. In *Brown II*, Chief Justice Warren urged local school authorities to act on these new principles swiftly and to move forward toward compliance “with all deliberate speed.”⁵⁷⁰ However, the Courts failed to realize a critical step in applying *Brown* to schools was the continuation of external pressures applied by grassroots organizations and community leaders unwilling to accept practices that mirrored segregation.

The South was the main target of *Brown* decision and the rest of the country observed the desegregation process in the South from their televisions. Southerners came up with clever ways to stall and avoid integration. Opponents of the *Brown* ruling formed resistance campaigns and adopted the doctrine of interposition, which used the ideology of state sovereignty to nullify the federal mandate.⁵⁷¹ All throughout the South, school boards, city councils, mayors, governors, and even ordinary citizens devised methods to circumvent integration. People were shocked to see white children and adults in Little Rock openly attack the black children who attempted to enter the school. The National Guard was called in to stem the violence and the federal government stood behind the Supreme Court’s mandate to integrate. However, many schools outside of the South believed they were exempt for the *Brown* ruling because they did not have legalized segregation.

⁵⁷⁰ *BROWN v. BOARD OF EDUCATION (II)*. The Oyez Project at IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law. 18 November 2014. <http://www.oyez.org/cases/1950-1959/1954/1954_1/>

⁵⁷¹ For example the Byrd Organization emerged as a dominant local power base in Virginia and fought virulently segregation under Senator Harry Byrd. Several works about the Byrd Organization are: J. Harvie Wilkinson III, *Harry Byrd and the Changing Face of Virginia Politics, 1945-1966* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1968); James W. Ely, *The Crisis of Conservative Virginia: The Bryd Organization and the Politics of Massive Resistance* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1976); and Frank Atkinson, *The Dynamic Dominion: Realignment and the Rise of the Two- Party Competition in Virginia, 1945-1980* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006) Second Edition

White Californians did not see how *Brown* impacted their schools because the state had already outlawed segregation in schools. Californians failed to recognize the prevalence of de facto segregation schools caused by residential segregation that created racially homogenous schools. For example, California's Education Code of 1947 discontinued practices of segregation in schools but did not address the segregation in schools that emerged because of neighborhood settlement patterns. Throughout the twentieth century, schools remained racially homogenous because restrictive housing covenants limited access to neighborhoods.⁵⁷² In theory, the Hawkins and Rumford Fair Housing Acts prohibited discrimination in both the public and private sectors of housing, which should have led to more racially diverse neighborhoods. White homeowners feared that open housing policies would negatively impact their property values and they openly fought against these measures. "White flight," a process that started after WWII where Whites moved out of neighborhoods and into suburbs, accelerated in many California cities after the passage of Hawkins and Rumford.⁵⁷³

Discrimination in housing led to segregated communities but school districts reinforced school boundaries with zoning practices. June Shagaloff, the NAACP Special Assistant for Education and Robert L. Carter, General Counsel, gave a statement to the California State School Board in 1962 and suggested that de facto public school segregation existed because of segregated residential neighborhoods but that school authorities also

⁵⁷² Clarence Caesar, "The Historical Demographics of Sacramento's Black Community, 1848-1900," *California History*, 75:3 (Fall, 1996): 198.

⁵⁷³ White Flight occurred in many of the urban centers in America as Fair Housing Acts started to be passed in the late 1960s and 1970s. Several works focus on this phenomena and include: Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005, 1996); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

facilitated the development of segregated schools, “by drawing school zone lines ‘around’ segregated residential areas, thereby, ‘containing’ Negro and white youngsters in separate schools.”⁵⁷⁴ They argued that the zoning practices that appeared throughout the state took advantage of residential segregation and reflected a deliberate intent by school authorities to maintain separate schools.⁵⁷⁵ Further, given the school’s reliance on the local property taxes for school funding, black schools remained underfunded and lacked the extensive resources found in many of the California’s White schools.⁵⁷⁶

Racial imbalance plagued large urban centers and was present in smaller cities such as Sacramento. Racial imbalance created segregated schools in California and even after several years of the passage of *Brown v. Board*, the system failed to provide an integrated learning environment. At first, California school authorities refused to examine the racial compositions in schools because they thought that *Brown* was directed at segregation in the South. However, in 1962 the California State Board of Education decided to take a proactive stance and adopted a policy declaring their intent in eliminating segregation in California. The policy was a grand gesture towards acknowledging de facto segregation but it was nothing more than a statement without any application of action. The NAACP decided to test their resolve to end segregation with a lawsuit that challenged the Pasadena school districts policy of segregation that allowed white students in the “neutral zone” to transfer to a whiter school. In 1963, the California Supreme Court decided in *Jackson v. Pasadena*: “The right to equal opportunity to education and the harmful consequences of

⁵⁷⁴ Memorandum from Tarea Hall Pittman, “Statement from the NAACP presented to the California State Board of Education,” April 12, 1962, Prepared by June Shagaloff and Robert L. Carter, Box 6, Folder 23, NAACP-WC Collection.

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁶ Janet Ward Schofield and H. Andrew Sagar, “Desegregation, School Practices, and Student Race Relations,” 62-70, in *The Consequences of School Desegregation*, ed. by Christine H. Rossell and Willis D. Hawley (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983).

segregation require that school boards take steps, insofar as reasonable, to alleviate racial imbalance in schools regardless of its cause.”⁵⁷⁷

After the court’s decision the California school board decided they needed to take a deeper look at de facto discrimination. In 1966, they surveyed the state’s largest school districts and reported on the racial and ethnic distribution of students. They looked at six different racial and ethnic categories and found 57 percent of Latino students attended minority schools and blacks represented the most segregated of the student population with 85 percent attending minority schools.⁵⁷⁸ The biggest reason they concluded for the presence of racially imbalanced schools was residential segregation. Racial representation in neighborhoods rendered into racially homogenous neighborhood schools and had the deleterious effect of creating disparities in the tax base, which translated to the amounts of expenditure per student available in each school.⁵⁷⁹

However, California acted quickly and adopted several policies over the years that demonstrated their dedication to adhering to the *Board v. Brown* decision. In 1967, under the direction of the State Board of Education, the State Superintendent issued a memorandum to all school superintendents that informed them of their responsibility to all schools superintendents to take “reasonably affirmative steps” to prevent segregation.⁵⁸⁰ In 1969, fifteen years after the passage of *Brown* California’s State Board of Education

⁵⁷⁷ Wollenburg, *Segregation*, 143.

⁵⁷⁸ Wilson Riles and Frederic Gunsby, “Racial and Ethnic Survey of California Public Schools” Part One: Distribution of Pupils, Fall, 1966, California State Department of Education, Sacramento, 23. files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED019167.pdf

⁵⁷⁹ Janet Ward Schofield and H. Andrew Sagar, “Desegregation, School Practices, and Student Race Relations,” 62-70, in *The Consequences of School Desegregation*, ed. by Christine H. Rossell and Willis D. Hawley (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983).

⁵⁸⁰ “Recommendations to Implement State Board of Education Policy Concerning Racial/Ethnic Considerations,” California State Equal Educational Opportunities Commission, Sacramento, July 10, 1975. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED117267.pdf>.

adopted strengthened regulations. They added a provision that required, “high priority in all decision relating to school sites to implement surveys and required districts to consider possible alternative plans.” In 1971 the Bagley Act was enacted which made California school officials responsible for integration. Assemblymen Bill Bagley believed that the “segregation of students creates educational problems in the schools” and proposed a system of financial grants to districts to “develop, implement, and evaluate programs that provided integrate education for students.” His bill provided a moderate solution to integration that required local districts to acquire information on patterns of race and ethnicity, but left it to local boards to determine how to address these issues.⁵⁸¹ Similar to the *Brown* decision, the Bagley Act did not set forth strict guidelines or even recommendations for implementation in the local school districts.

Progress was weakened by a wave of backlash from individuals who alleged the creation of freedoms encroached upon their freedoms and violated their civil rights. This backlash, comprised mostly of White conservatives, utilized the rhetoric used during the civil rights era to challenge the legality of civil rights legislation and signaled that “majority of Californians would only tolerate so much liberalism.”⁵⁸² There were strong opponents to the bill who organized a referendum for appeal and created Proposition 21, the Wakefield Anti-Busing Initiative. They feared that the door was left too open for school districts to use busing of students out of the district to address the issue.⁵⁸³ The Wakefield Bill stated that no governing board of district could require any student or pupil to be transported for any purpose or for any reasons without the permission of the parent or guardian. Canson

⁵⁸¹ “Recommendations to Implement State Board.”

⁵⁸² Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 14.

⁵⁸³ F. Kemerer and P. Sampson, *California School Law* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009)

believed that the message of AB 551 was, “the great moral challenge of America today; that message is unbridled racism.”⁵⁸⁴

Dismantling Jim Crow in the Golden State

After the untimely death of Leonard Carter in 1974, Canson became the Western Regional Director of the NAACP-WC and she came into the position knowing that black Californians still had a tough road ahead of them.⁵⁸⁵ By this point, Canson had served as a leader of the NAACP Credit Union Movement in the 1940s and 1950s, a Field Director, a Legislative Advocate, and held the position of Credit Union and Consumer Education Specialist for the California State Office of Economic Opportunity.⁵⁸⁶ The struggle for educational equality was at the forefront of her agenda as the Western Regional director. For Canson, segregation continued in the California school system and it appeared more prevalent than before.

Despite the state and federal backing to support access to education, Canson argued that the White community represented “the biggest and most untamable opponent facing the black community.”⁵⁸⁷ She feared that black youth were denied educational rights because of the amount of discrimination children faced in integrated schools, the stalling tactics school districts employed to prevent desegregation, and the process of integration. Moreover, she saw a lack of positive role models for young blacks in the classrooms or in the ranks of the

⁵⁸⁴ Virna Canson, “NAACP Says Assembly Bill ‘Smells of Racism’,” *Sacramento Observer*, September 10, 1970, 4.

⁵⁸⁵ Elizabeth Fernandez, “Fighting Fire with Fire,” *The Crisis*, 90:2 (June/July 1983): 26.

⁵⁸⁶ Virna Canson, Oral Interview, “Waging the War on Poverty and Discrimination in California through the NAACP, 1953–1974,” 8, NAACP-WC Collection.

⁵⁸⁷ Letter from Virna to Charles M. Rossie, Jr, May 31, 1962 Box 10, Folder 20, NAACP-WC Collection.

school's administration.⁵⁸⁸ She was also concerned that the continuation of practices that supported segregation and school policies, which implied that black youth were less intelligence, could have long-term psychological effects on the black community.⁵⁸⁹

Empowered by the *Brown v. Board* decision and state concessions, in the early Canson pushed the NAACP-WC to attack racial balance in schools. She believed that racial imbalance impacted white children and non-white children. In a statement to the school board they suggested that: "Feelings of inferiority, lowered motivation and inferior educational achievement, in short, the damage to the Negro child required to attend a so called de facto segregated school in the North is similar if not identical to the damage resulting from legally enforced segregated education in the South."⁵⁹⁰ Several branches spearheaded efforts to end racial imbalance in their school districts.

In 1960s the San Francisco chapter of the NAACP, under the leadership of Lois Barnes, pushed the San Francisco Unified School District (S.F.U.S.D.) to correct the "racial imbalance" that existed in San Francisco schools. Lois Barnes, a white woman, wanted to see better educational opportunities for all children worked for years in NAACP to fight for educational justice. When Lois addressed racial imbalance in the school it was not her first complaint with S.F.U.S.D. Earlier in the 1950s one of the high schools, George Washington High School, promoted the play "Huckleberry Finn" and used the character's name of

⁵⁸⁸ Virna Canson, Article write up for "Other Voices," Box 34, Folder 20, NAACP-WC Collection.

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁰ Memorandum from Tarea Hall Pittman, "Statement from the NAACP presented to the California State Board of Education," April 12, 1962, Prepared by June Shagaloff and Robert L. Carter, Box 6, Folder 23, NAACP-WC.

“Nigger Jim” in its publication.⁵⁹¹ Lois publicly lambasted the schools overt racism and argued that this type of language created a hostile environment for black students. Lois’ tactic worked and within two weeks the school removed the offensive wording and changed the character’s name.⁵⁹²

Canson worried that other schools had similar records and she ordered every Educational Secretary to submit reports on the school’s student demographics for their chapter.⁵⁹³ Barnes’ completed the San Francisco report and found that S.F.S.U.D. schools not only remained segregated by a black and white binary, but also by other races and ethnicities. This pattern of racial imbalance reflected the historical legacy of the state but violated California’s state guidelines of an integrated elementary school, which stated the racial and ethnic breakdown of the student body, must match the overall population, give or take fifteen percent.⁵⁹⁴ Using this information, Barnes argued that “racial imbalance” led to disparities in educational resources and demanded full integration to ensure quality education for all children.⁵⁹⁵ Other chapters submitted reports that supported Barnes’ findings of racial imbalance. In 1966, the State Board of Education gave notice to school districts that they had to look for desegregation efforts before approving federally financed compensatory programs in poverty areas. They issued a resolution stating that “it was

⁵⁹¹ Reprinted from the *Historical Souvenir Booklet of Black History Week*, published by the African-American Historical and Cultural Society, February 1978, retrieved from http://foundsf.org/index.php?title=NAACP_San_Francisco_Branch

⁵⁹² “New Name for Washington School,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, Box 8, Folder 18, NAACP-WC Collection.

⁵⁹³ Memo to Branches from Virna Canson, December 8, 1970, Box 8, Folder 18, NAACP-WC Collection.

⁵⁹⁴ Cynthia Liao, “Rhetoric of Race and Rights in Chinese Parents’ Anti Busing Campaign in San Francisco, 1971-1972” (Master’s Thesis, Stanford University, May 2009), 22.

⁵⁹⁵ “Judge Orders the City to Integrate Schools,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 29, 1971, Box 38, Box 42, NAACP-WC Collection.

imperative” for local school districts to develop their own desegregation plans as a part of their overall compensatory programs.⁵⁹⁶

The Sacramento City Unified School District moved quickly to address the State Board of Education’s resolution and worked to formulate a plan that rectified racial imbalance in schools. The school board was aware of the perils of implementing two-way busing and looked for other options. In 1966, the Superintendent worked with parents and other community leaders to prepare children and the city for integration. They formulated a plan that incorporated a one-way busing plan that carried black children to formerly all white schools. The plan appealed to white residents because the decision had little impact upon their children. The integration program shifted 1,000 black children from five different elementary schools into 19 predominantly white schools.⁵⁹⁷ Over the summer, volunteers worked with the black students for six weeks to help them make the transition easier to the white schools. In a sense, the school district supplied a plan of open enrollment that gave parents the choice of moving their children and did not place any mandates upon the parents. Some black parents supported the plan because it gave their children access to schools in better areas. The Superintendent of the Sacramento school district stated, “ I have consistently taken the position that you could justify moving youngsters in disadvantage areas to higher- horizon areas and motivate them to better achievement.” However, other parents such as Carol Green questioned the one-way focus of the program and stated, “ Who’s to judge what our children’s culture ought to be. They’re saying our children ought to be like white children.”⁵⁹⁸ However the school superintendent supported the system of

⁵⁹⁶ “Board Makes Integration ‘Must’ For Poverty Help,” *The Modesto Bee*, June 10, 1966, B-7.

⁵⁹⁷ “Children Have Long Walk to Class, *Sacramento Bee*, September 11, 1966, 1.

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid.

one-way busing because he believed that minority children needed “ the opportunity to break out of the circle of poverty, to escape.”⁵⁹⁹ When the program officially started, the school district failed to provide buses and parents threatened to boycott classes if buses were not provided for their children. In some cases, students were told that they had to walk two miles a day across busy streets.⁶⁰⁰ However, the Sacramento’s plan of “one-way” integration appeared to rectify some of the issues with racial imbalance.

The state wanted school districts to examine their schools and offer their own solutions for addressing segregation. Some school districts prepared plans that provide for open enrollment when there were vacancies. Other districts suggested that older schools be torn down and new schools built in areas where both white and non-white children were zoned. In San Francisco when they were presented with the NAACP’s report and the request for full integration, the school board and administrators did not see the link between racial imbalance in education and the quality of education. They ignored the NAACP’s request to improve and reduce racial imbalance in the schools. However, the members of the San Francisco chapter of the NAACP, mostly women, picketed the school district’s office and threatened to sue the San Francisco Board of Education if racial disparities remained.⁶⁰¹

In June of 1970, the SF-NAACP grew tired of the school district’s lack of movement on the issue and filed suit against San Francisco elementary schools. Judge Wiegel found in the *San Francisco Unified School District v. Johnson* case that the school had to prepare a “comprehensive plan” for racial desegregation. This ruling came on the

⁵⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁰ James Bow, “ Can California Bus its Way to Integration?” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, March 5, 1968, 17.

⁶⁰¹ Liao, “Rhetoric of Race,” 50.

heels of the Federal Supreme Court's ruling on April 28, 1971, in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, which declared that federal courts could mandate busing as a way to desegregate schools.⁶⁰² With the purpose of addressing "racial imbalance," San Francisco schools implemented the "Horseshoe Plan," and created seven districts where students from each would be bused into another district in order to create racial balance.⁶⁰³ Similar to other cities throughout the nation, San Francisco virulently resisted busing and put their children in private schools, moved into the suburbs, or protested the initiative. Appalled by their reactions, Canson concluded that California mirrored the South because, "Despite the requirements of the law and court mandates, most California urban school districts have either purposely or unintentionally done nothing to reduce racial imbalance within their districts as a consequence, racial imbalance has increased, aggravated by housing segregation and by the 'flight of whites' to the suburbs."⁶⁰⁴

In the fall of 1971, the California State Department of Education had the Bureau of Intergroup Relations examine the racial and ethnic distribution of students throughout the state. The Bureau of Intergroup Relations compiled a larger state report on racial imbalance and found the number of children in predominantly minority schools had increased since the passage of *Brown*. They revealed that blacks were isolated to a much greater than that of Spanish-surnamed pupils. Throughout the state, more than one third of all black pupils in the state attended schools that were 90 percent or more black, and more than half of them attended schools that were 50 percent or more black. These figures made sense in larger urban centers but there were racially imbalanced schools outside large urban centers. In the

⁶⁰² *Johnson v. San Francisco Unified School District*, 339 F.2d 1315 (N.D. Calif. 1971).

⁶⁰³ Liao, "Rhetoric of Race," 82.

⁶⁰⁴ Memo from Virna Canson to Albert Rodda, Box 10, Folder 23, NAACP-WC Collection.

Sacramento Unified Schools there were fifty-six racially imbalanced schools and in smaller counties such as Yolo and Butte County they found three schools that were racially imbalanced.⁶⁰⁵

Freedom of Choice

The Board of Education wanted to address racial imbalance but did not want to take the power of the local school districts hands. They looked at implementing programs that gave parents “freedom of choice” in participating in the integration process. The Board had to be careful about freedom- of-choice plans because of the Supreme Court ruling in *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County*. In the *Green* case the school board adopted a plan that allowed for students to annually choose where they wanted to attend schools. However, in the first few years of following the plan no white student chose to attend the black school. The Supreme Court found the “freedom of choice” unfairly places the burden of desegregation on blacks. Justice William J. Brennan, author of the opinion, explained: “The burden on a school board today is to come forward with a plan that promises realistically to work and promises realistically to work now.”⁶⁰⁶

In 1977, a group of scholars gathered to study the problem of de facto segregation and introduced a plan using terms and conditions that appealed to white constituents. During the 1977 session of the Californian Legislature, The Model Integration Incentive Act, SB 1064, was introduced to legislators and then circulated to educators and political analysts.⁶⁰⁷ The authors of the bill believed achieving integration was problematic in California because of racial compositions in neighborhoods. This type of segregation

⁶⁰⁵ Memo from Ples A. Griffin, Chief, Bureau of Intergroup Relations, to Interested Educators, Racial and Ethnic Survey of Pupils, Fall 1971, September 15, 1972, Box 22, Folder 2.

⁶⁰⁶ *Charles C. Green v. County School Board of New Kent County, Virginia*, 391, U.S. 430 (1968).

⁶⁰⁷ Carol Abrams, John E. Coons, Stephen D. Sugarman, “ School Integration Through Carrots, Not Sticks,” *Theory in Practice* 17:1 (Feb. 1978): 23-31.

proved difficult to address because previous practices created de facto segregation in housing and schools. Even though the state passed housing acts to rectify these issues, many neighborhoods still remained racially homogenous and established schools that were also racially homogeneous. In order to address this issue, they wanted to establish a system that rewarded schools for opening their doors to students that differed from the schools racial or ethnic composition.

Their proposed bill provided financial incentives for school districts that offered an integrated learning environment. The Model Incentive Act required schools to submit plans for incorporating more minorities within their schools to the Department of Education. Once approved, schools with successful plans received financial bonuses based upon how many students they had within their schools who did not represent the largest racial or ethnic group in their school. If the plan was approved the school received an additional five hundred dollars for each student who was not a member of the largest racial or ethnic group in the school. The authors of the bill believed that without some sort of external coercion or financial incentives, schools would not achieve cooperative integration. Under the bill, suburban public schools were not required to cooperate with central cities wishing to transfer or exchange students. They were counting on local political pressure in some suburbs to force school participation in integration. The Supreme Court was unreceptive to allowing state legislatures to provide financial assistance for children to receive a private education. When schools ratio got more to the ideal would be paid more. The authors of the bill wanted families to pursue integration on their own terms.⁶⁰⁸

⁶⁰⁸ Carol Abrams, John E. Coons, Stephen D. Sugarman, “ School Integration Through Carrots, Not Sticks,” <http://www.law.berkeley.edu/files/TheoryIntoPractice1978.pdf>.

SB 1064 was coded in language of choice and a reaction to bussing measures that forced families to participate in integration and produced hostile reactions. Several black community leaders found the bill unacceptable because they believed that the bill gave way to racism. The bill offered choice but favored white students over minority students. Representing choice as an option to parents did not address the larger concern of eliminating of segregation in the schools. For civil rights leaders, achieving integration in education was not a matter of public choice, but a constitutional mandate and a legal responsibility. This system of alleged choice produced a voucher type system that assisted in integration, but minorities became a pawn in the system rather than a principle actor in the solution.⁶⁰⁹

Canson presented an opposing statement on the proposed state bill at the Senate Education Committee's Interim Hearing. She argued that the bill created a system of bonuses for people who obeyed the law. She also found that under the bill black children were treated like as a wild animal that had a bounty on their head she stated, "The Black child is more than a vehicle through which public dollars flow into bastions of wealth and racism with little or no strings attached and particularly no standards for academic excellence, no criteria for teacher and administrator performance and no requirement for measureable results."⁶¹⁰ She believed that the bill was nothing more than a gimmick that exploited blacks and other minorities so that "integration" could be shrouded in the language of choice.⁶¹¹

However, white families connected opportunity to attend their local public district

⁶⁰⁹ Virna Canson, Statement to the Senate Education Committee's Interim Hearing on the Proposed Integration Incentives Act (SB 1064), Sept. 26-27, LA, California, Box 38, Folder 3.

⁶¹⁰ Canson, "Statement to the Senate Education."

⁶¹¹ Ibid.

as a right that the state could not abrogate. In their quests for homes they often sought out areas based on the performance of the school zoned for that neighborhood. They purchased homes where they were sure that their children would receive a quality education. Middle-class white families left urban centers for the suburbs because of better living conditions and schools. They did not want their children to attend schools in lower-class neighborhoods because they thought their children would receive poor education. They also believed they were entitled to send their children to the neighborhood school and balked at the idea of transferring children to other schools to achieve “integration.”⁶¹² Robbins couched his bill in antiracist claims but Canson directly attacked the antiracist claims made by Robbins and his allies: “The proponents of segregation have taken great comfort in a simplistic campaign phrase ‘ A black child does not need to sit beside a white child to learn’” She attempted to sway voters and stated, “Education in isolation is not an effective way to end this dismal record. Not only does a black child need to sit beside a white child, or a white teacher needs to work in a class of non-whites to learn, but a white child desperately needs to sit beside a black child to learn and be prepared to be a citizen of this colored world.”⁶¹³

Robbins’ campaign and campaign materials played into people’s fears about integrated schools. In a questionnaire he sent to his constituents throughout the state he asked them certain questions but then provided answers that informed the voters about the dangers of busing. For example on question he included asked: “What about the ever present danger of violent crime?” he provided the answer: “ Children in strange, unfamiliar

⁶¹² Throughout the state, parents attempted to file suit against busing measures. The most contentious battles occurred in Los Angeles.

⁶¹³ Virna Canson, Statement to the Senate Education Committee’s Interim Hearing on the Proposed Integration Incentives Act (SB 1064), Sept. 26-27, LA, California, Box 38, Folder 3. NAACP-WC Collection.

neighborhoods are much more prone to violence than they would be in their own neighborhood...And there's always the danger of a child missing the bus, becoming terrified and getting lost..."⁶¹⁴ Proposition 1, otherwise known as the Robbins Amendment, declared school boards had no obligation or responsibility to exceed the guarantees of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment with regard to student school assignment or pupil transportation. Voters believed they had the right of choice and the amendment passed by more than two-thirds. The passage of the Robbins Amendment ended mandatory student reassignment and busing. Robbins argued that he would make use of other "voluntary measures" to achieve desegregation such as magnet schools and voluntary programs that provided students with transportation. He claimed once mandatory busing was abolished white parents would enroll their children in public schools.⁶¹⁵ Many white parents supported Proposition 1 and there were few documented suits by whites against the proposition. However, in Sacramento, a lawyer filed suit in Superior Court on behalf of a white man who contended that Proposition 1 violated his children's right to attend an integrated high school, even though there was no busing for integration in Sacramento High School.⁶¹⁶

The New Enemy: Intelligence Testing

Not only did California resist measures to integrate schools with freedom of choice programs but the California State School Board introduced other measures to lead to segregation of classrooms, even within integrated schools. On the surface it appeared that

⁶¹⁴ Senator Alan Robbins, "Californians Against Forced Busing," Questionnaire and Fundraising Letter, Box 34, Folder 48, NAACP-WC.

⁶¹⁵ The NAACP and the ACLU attempted to have Proposition 1 overturned and failed in their efforts. In June of 1982 the Supreme Court upheld the appellate court's decision concerning Proposition 1.

⁶¹⁶ "NAACP Loses First Round in Battle to Kill Prop. 1," *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, December 4, 1979, 16.

some school districts were on track in terms of integration, but just beneath the surface another enemy to integration emerged-the intelligence test. In the 1960s, educators recognized the educational disparities between children and sought out solutions for addressing these gaps. They found it difficult to adequately instruct children who fell below the state's new curriculum standards. In order to address these issues, 1969 California educators mandated the usage of intelligence testing because school administrators and teachers complained about educational gaps with their students. In addition, concessions were made for students with special needs so they could have access to "mainstream education." Intelligence tests became a standardized marker for accessing students overall ability to learn and separated the highly intelligent from the "educably retarded."⁶¹⁷ Within two years, a group of San Francisco parents suspected the test was a tool for segregating their children within the school. In effect, the I.Q. tests created "in-school segregation," which separated black children into different classrooms within the same schools throughout California, but the most egregious case emerged in San Francisco.⁶¹⁸

According to newspaper and NAACP chapter reports, black students made up nine percent of the overall student population in the state but they represented twenty-seven percent of the enrollment in E.M.R. classrooms. When the San Francisco chapter of the NAACP looked specifically at S.F.U.S.D. they found that the black student population in San Francisco approached twenty-eight percent but made consisted of sixty-six percent of E.M.R. enrollment.⁶¹⁹ Outraged by the disproportionate representation of black youth in

⁶¹⁷ Richard R. Valencia, Lisa Suzuki, *Intelligence Testing and Minority Students: Foundations, Performance Factors* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001), 5.

⁶¹⁸ Karoyln Tyson, *Integration Interrupted: Tracking, Black Students and Acting White after Brown* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 8.

⁶¹⁹ "Exams Get a Test in U.S. Court," *Oakland Tribune*, Dec. 11, 1977, Box 44, Folder 74, NAACP-WC Collection.

E.M.R. classrooms, the parents in conjunction with the NAACP independently re-tested the children.⁶²⁰ The Bay Area Association of Black Psychologists added black cultural items to the standard IQ tests and students scores increased by seventeen to thirty eight points placing them within normal ranges of intelligence.⁶²¹

In 1972, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and Public Advocates filed *Larry P. v. Riles*, a class action suit, against S.F.U.S.D. Federal District Judge, Robert Peckham, gave the parents a temporary victory when ruled in favor of a preliminary motion to immediately stop intelligence testing in the district. There was a larger statewide movement against the IQ test and the NAACP and other community leaders pushed for the passage of a bill that abolished mandatory IQ tests in California. As they surveyed educators, they found teachers had issues with the test and some suggested the tests were weighted against minority children. Assemblyman Willie L. Brown, Jr., put one bill forward that limited group testing but allowed for individually administered IQ tests and experimental group IQ testing for research. Assemblyman Leroy F. Greene introduced the other bill that permitted some group and individual IQ tests administered by local school districts.⁶²² Brown's bill, AB 483 passed in 1972 but Governor Reagan vetoed the bill.⁶²³ In his veto message, Reagan stated that he felt the bill killed aptitude testing, rather than preventing its misuse.⁶²⁴

However, the issue of IQ testing still remained in the courts and in 1974, Judge Peckham expanded his original ruling and mandated that the entire state school system

⁶²⁰ "IQ Testing on Trial," *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 19, 1977, Box 40, Folder 11, NAACP-WC Collection.

⁶²¹ William Coonery, "An Attack on Using IQ to Place Black School Kids," *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 12, 1977, Box 40, Folder 11, NAACP-WC Collection.

⁶²² Robert E Sweet, "IQ Test Bans Go to Governor with Assembly Backing," *Independent*, August 2, 1972, B-9.

⁶²³ Bryce Anderson, "IQ Testing Saved by Reagan's Veto," *Redlands Daily Facts*, August 25, 1972, 12.

⁶²⁴ "Governor Vetoes IQ Test Curbs," *Sacramento Bee*, June 2, 1973, 13.

cease testing. Judge Peckham discovered blacks made up nine percent of the state's school system but represented over twenty- seven percent of the students in E.M.R. classes.⁶²⁵ In 1977, *Larry P. v. Riles* finally had its day in court and the court proceedings revealed larger issues with the test. Asa Hilliard II, the Dean of the San Francisco University's School of Education, testified in the courts that the problem with the test came from its "standardization" because the "test could not read into the experiences the child has nor can it account for his cultural background."⁶²⁶ He illustrated this point during the trial by highlighting some of the questions that appeared on the I.Q. test. One of the questions he presented in the court asked students if it was better to pay bills by check or cash and the correct answer was by check. He argued that if the family did not have a checking account the child lacked the necessary experience to answer the question correctly.⁶²⁷

One of the psychologists who retested the children, Gerald West also questioned the validity of the test because the questions did not reflect intelligence but served as marker of one's cultural background. West retested several of the students within their homes and based questions on intelligence and cultural markers they were more familiar with. He concluded that none of the children he tested were developmentally challenged. Further elaborating on the cultural bias of the test, the NAACP's attorney, Armando Menocal, accused the State Department of Education for a "pattern of actions with the institutional objective of fostering racial segregation." He argued that the Department

⁶²⁵ "Blacks Challenging the Use of Tests to Place Remedial Pupils," *New York Times*, October 12, 1977, Box 40, Folder 11, NAACP-WC Collection.

⁶²⁶ Ibid.

⁶²⁷ Tom Hall, "Black Educator Challenges IQ Tests," *San Francisco Examiner*, October 13, 1977, Box 40, Folder12, NAACP-WC Collection.

ignored warnings from the Legislature and numerous experts, who stated the tests did not effectively evaluate black children because of the cultural bias inherent in the test.⁶²⁸

The school district stood by the use of the IQ tests and posited it represented a good indicator in predicting future school performance. In a press release the school board argued, "...factors of adversity, which affect the inner city have inner city have a relationship with mental retardation," and led to educational gaps between Whites and African Americans.⁶²⁹ The deputy attorney general also issued a statement in defense of the state school policy and supported IQ tests. She outlined in her brief that IQ tests were as a good way to predict how a child will do in school and helped to determine if he has the intelligence to learn along with his classmates. She also connected adversity of the inner city to mental retardation and commented, "poor pre-birth, post- birth and infant care, poor nutrient, poor home environment, lack of intellectual stimulation during the formative years" led to differences in intelligence levels.⁶³⁰ Throughout the trial, the S.F.U.S.D. dangerously flirted with connecting race with intelligence.⁶³¹ In the end, the parents triumphed because the court agreed the IQ tests were culturally biased and deemed they could no longer be used.⁶³²

Canson and the NAACP pushed the issue further and requested an injunction prohibiting the use of intelligence testing on blacks. She knew that Governor Reagan would

⁶²⁸ Ibid.

⁶²⁹ White Ristow, "Racism and: Inn Defending the Use of IQ Tests, Why Did the Superintendent of Public Institution allow his Attorneys to Suggest that blacks have Lower Intelligence than Whites," *The San Francisco Bay Guardian*, June 1, 1978, Box 40, Folder 12, NAACP-WC Collection.

⁶³⁰ William Coonery, "An Attack on Using IQ to Place Black School Kids," *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 12, 1977, Found in Box 40, Folder 11, NAACP-WC.

⁶³¹ Ibid.

⁶³² It should be noted that the issue of using IQ testing on African American children has resurfaced in recent years as parents are now frustrated that their children are not tested, which has led to their continued exclusion from the upper echelon classes.

veto any bill they attempted to get passed. The continued usage of culturally biased test would only hurt the educational advancement of children throughout the state. The test failed to take into account a student's cultural background and was tailored to white's cultural background. After five years of legal delays Judge Peckham made a landmark ruling when he ruled the test resulted in " grossly disproportionate enrollments of black children." He granted the request for an injunction and prevented the state from administering any type of standardized test that identified or placed black children in special classes without the prior approval of the courts. Canson celebrated the court's injunction and she called the ruling, " a major step toward ending an insidious form of discrimination on persons on the basis of race, especially black, and also persons on the basis of class."⁶³³ California became the only state to bar IQ testing to evaluate black children.

Protecting Children's Access to Education

In the 1970s, Canson tackled another issue in the public schools that led to an increased number of black dropouts. She found a disturbing trend when the educational committee reported on the alarming number of suspensions minority students received in comparison to nonminority students. In the late 1960s, teachers had effectively lobbied to get legislation passed that gave them to suspend students for a designated period. Prior to the bill, teachers had to receive permission from the principal to suspend students for on or two days. The bill removed this requirement and allowed teachers to dole out suspensions

⁶³³ "CAL IQ Test Ruled Unconstitutional," *Ukiah Daily Journal*, October 17, 1979,40.

without the principal's approval.⁶³⁴

The educational committee of the NAACP found higher rates of repeated suspension for black students. They also concluded that students with several suspensions in a year were more likely to drop out of school. Canson lobbied assemblymen to overturn and change this bill. The new bill was aimed at limiting the power that teachers had over implementing the terms of student suspensions.⁶³⁵ Canson did not want to strip away power from the teacher but she wanted to see the incorporation of a more comprehensive behavior plan. If students had behavioral issues in class the school needed to involve both parents and teachers to address these issues. She insisted teachers meet with parents to discuss student behavior and action plans that order to address student behavior. However, if the student violated this action plan then teachers could suspend students. For Canson, the previous bill gave too much power to the teacher and implied that parents of lower class students were ineffective at parenting.⁶³⁶ The Assembly Bill 846 successfully passed in 1971 and within the first year of its passage reports indicated lower dropout rates.⁶³⁷

Another more controversial matter that Canson disagreed with was the introduction of Black English Vernacular (BEV) programs into the schools. Educators wanted to fix educational gaps between students and suggested the differences between white and black dialect hampered progress in subjects such as reading. One study employed six different

⁶³⁴ Virna Canson, "Remarks prepared for Delivery to the Black Political Education Conference, Education Workshop Sacramento, August 23, 1974, Box 41, Folder 11, NAACP-WC.

⁶³⁵ Virna Canson, "Legislative Advocate, Annual Report for 1971," Box 44, Folder 74, NAACP-WC.

⁶³⁶ Ibid.

⁶³⁷ Virna Canson, "Legislative Advocate, Annual Report for 1971," Box 44, Folder 74, NAACP-WC.

types of teaching strategies in predominantly black classrooms and found children learned more in an “artful” classroom where the teacher accounted for the differences in dialect.⁶³⁸ Several educators believed standard English was an obstacle to learning and that implementation of BEV programs would enhance academic performance of minority students.⁶³⁹ In a newspaper article covering black English the journalist explained, “White Americans have long been aware that black Americans, when they are talking to one another, have a language all their own.”⁶⁴⁰ They suggested that students who spoke “Black Language” were speaking a foreign language and needed further training in English to assist them in their studies.⁶⁴¹

The programs used black language the educators believed they were more familiar with and then progressed to more standard English. When students started the courses they were given course materials that were in “the dialect of poor blacks.”⁶⁴² Programs started first in Los Angeles and Stockton and children placed in classes where they received 45-minute drills in English several times a week. A task force of educators recommended a statewide program with special training for teachers. The state Board of Education approved “in concept” programs to teach black pupils standard English. The state Board

⁶³⁸ Ann McCormick Prestrup did this study for the Language Behavior Research Laboratory. *Black Dialect, Interference and Accommodation of Reading Instruction in First Grade* (Berkeley: University of California, 1973).

⁶³⁹ James D. Williams, *The Teacher's Grammar Book* (

⁶⁴⁰ Jacquin Sanders, “Black English Changing Language,” *San Bernadino County Sun*, July 25, 1971, 37.

⁶⁴¹ It should be noted not all educators supported the programs either and considered it their duty to teach children appropriate grammar.

⁶⁴² “Bridge Closing the Gap Between Ghetto Slang and English,” *The Progress Bulletin*, June 12, 1977, 22.

supported the idea that pupils who learned standard English did better in their academics than those who speak “black language.”⁶⁴³

There were several issues parents had with BEV classes and the national branch of the NAACP took a stand against these programs. In an editorial in *The Crisis* they described black language class as struggling to transform a vernacular which is more regional than racial, i.e., more southern than Negro.⁶⁴⁴ The editorial called for action: “Black parents throughout this nation should rise up in unanimous condemnation of this insidious conspiracy to cripple our children permanently.”⁶⁴⁵ Canson believed that program encouraged children to continue speaking the different “language” and would leave them out of mainstream education.⁶⁴⁶ Canson told a board committee, “Black children can learn standard English when and where there exists a firm educational commitment to teaching.” She also suggested that the idea that blacks speak a separate language as nonsense.⁶⁴⁷

Creating Positive Educational Paths

Canson believed that segregation continued in the California school system and it appeared more prevalent than before and state programs continued to work against nonwhite children. Despite the state and federal backing to support access to education, she argued that the White community represented “the biggest and most untamable opponent facing the black community.”⁶⁴⁸ Black youth were denied educational rights because of the amount of discrimination children faced in integrated schools, the stalling tactics school

⁶⁴³ “English Courses for Black Pupils for Black Pupils Wins Approval,” *Sacramento Bee*, January 9, 1981, 4.

⁶⁴⁴ Editorial, “Black Nonsense,” *The Crisis*, 78 (April-May 1971), 78.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid, 78.

⁶⁴⁶ “Calif.Considers Teaching English as a Foreign Language to Black Pupils,” *Jet*, March 12,1981.

⁶⁴⁷ “English Courses for Black Pupils for Black Pupils Wins Approval,” *Sacramento Bee*, January 9, 1981, 4.

⁶⁴⁸ Letter from Virna to Charles M. Rossie, Jr, May 31, 1962 Box 10, Folder 20, NAACP-WC Collection.

districts employed to prevent desegregation, and the process of integration. Moreover, she saw a lack of positive role models for young blacks in the classrooms or in the ranks of the school's administration.⁶⁴⁹ She also feared that the continuation of practices that supported segregation and school policies, which implied that black youth were less intelligence, could have long-term psychological effects on the black community.⁶⁵⁰

In 1978, Canson pushed for the establishment of ACT-SO, which was a new initiative established by the NAACP that employed an updated version of W.E.B. Du Bois' theory of the "Talented Tenth".⁶⁵¹ ACT-SO was the brainchild of journalist Vernon Jarrett who, with the support of the National Association of Black Journalists, created the Academic, Cultural, Technological and Scientific Olympics, or ACT-SO, in the Chicago area.⁶⁵² Jarrett started ACT-SO because he believed that there needed to be a program for young people that focused on Du Bois' initial dream of the Talented Tenth that filled in educational gaps. Moreover, for Jarrett the program represented a, "herculean step forward in giving young black people some kind of counter-activity to the degrading circumstances that beset them in most of the urban communities.... particularly in those communities who are disadvantaged."⁶⁵³

Within a year, the national organization of the NAACP tapped into Vernon's idea of ACT-SO and incorporated the program into its youth division. The NAACP found the ACT-SO program to be the perfect counterweight to the attacks on education. The program

⁶⁴⁹ Virna Canson, Article write up for "Other Voices," Box 34, Folder 20, NAACP-WC Collection.

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁵¹ Bryon Robertson, "NAACP Opens Black Talent Search," *The Sacramento Bee*, April 1, 1978, Box 34, Folder 48, NAACP- WC Collection.

⁶⁵² ACT-SO, Program Pamphlet, Box 34, Folder 48, NAACP-WC Collection.

⁶⁵³ Ibid.

united the 1,700 local NAACP chapters into coordinating scholastic competitions between young blacks and as Jarrett stated, “to salvage as much of the wasted talent as possible.”⁶⁵⁴ Initially, the national office decided to test the program in several key states. Canson lobbied the national branch and argued the West Coast branches represented the ideal location to implement the program because local chapters had strong community bases and needed a program that celebrated the educational achievements of the black youth.⁶⁵⁵ She was successful in her lobbying efforts and the NAACP chose San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Oakland to represent three of the first eight test sites for the program. Vernon Jarrett became the national chairman for NAACP's ACT-SO and traveled to these cities in order to promote the program.⁶⁵⁶

When he visited the NAACP chapters in San Francisco, Oakland, and Los Angeles he used language that appealed to the black middle-class. He promoted the program as a vehicle for creating a leadership vanguard that would lead, educate, and uplift others of the race.⁶⁵⁷ ACT-SO included mobilizing the adult community into supporting and promoting the development of youth, to provide students with the keys necessary for making positive contributions to society, and to recognize the academic achievements of black youth.⁶⁵⁸ Astutely, he compared the goals of ACT-SO to other programs that had located and developed young black athletes back when racist myths kept them from participating in many professional sports. Jarrett realized that sporting programs became opportunities for

⁶⁵⁴ Steve Geissinger, *Observer Newspaper*, April 6-12, 1978, Box 34, Folder 48, NAACP-WC Collection.

⁶⁵⁵ Letter from Virna Canson to Jarrett, 1978, Box 34, Folder 49, NAACP-WC Collection.

⁶⁵⁶ It is not clear from the records whether Canson's request for Jarrett to promote the program in the Golden State led to his later national tour, but it is clear that Canson was the first to make such a request to both Jarrett and the national branch.

⁶⁵⁷ “Interview with Jarrett,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, Box 34, Folder 48, NAACP-WC Collection.

⁶⁵⁸ NAACP Pamphlet, Box 34, Folder 51, NAACP-WC.

young blacks to destroy myths of white superiority in sports and opened doorways for blacks to enter the sporting world. Comparing the ACT-SO programs goals with these athletic programs, Jarrett stated, “We think that we have some of the finest young minds, in any race, in black America. We want to discover it (talent), we want to nourish it and we want to reward it while it's young, and maybe we can have the same kind of Olympian gymnastics, or acrobatics, if you will in the academic and cultural and scientific world that we see on the basketball courts and football fields of America.”⁶⁵⁹

For Canson, ACT-SO’s focus on educational achievement, fit within the long-term goals achieving civil rights. She did not see any contradictions with the NAACP-WC’s push for integration while they also fought for preserving black educational goals. Canson alleged the artificial barriers of race detoured the black community’s access to fundamental American right of education. In addition, she stated, “We suffer from attitudes within the Negro community. These attitudes have come through abuse and persecution, and I fear for the future of many young Negroes who use race and the reason they are discriminated against because of race as an excuse.”⁶⁶⁰

The creation of ACT-SO came at a perfect time for California because, as Canson stated, “We are looking at the sophisticated techniques that are being used to kill our children,” and challenged others to use educational uplift to combat these techniques.⁶⁶¹ For Canson, educational achievement was necessary in breaking down societal barriers and lead to access to first class citizenship.⁶⁶² The principles advanced by ACT-SO program blended

⁶⁵⁹ NAACP Pamphlet, Box 34, Folder 51, NAACP-WC.

⁶⁶⁰ Letter from Virna Canson to Charles M Rossie, Jr., May 31, 1962, Box 10, Folder 20, NAACP-WC.

⁶⁶¹ Virna Canson, Press Release, April 5, 1978, Box 34, Folder 51, NAACP-WC.

⁶⁶² Virna Canson, “Weekend Meeting of Great Progress,” *West Coast NAACP*, 1978, Box 34, Folder 40, NAACP-WC.

beautifully with the ideals of black middle-class respectability, because they ensured that young people had access to positive role models, focused their energies on education, and provided a training ground for the next generation of leaders.

Canson supported the goals of the program and actively promoted the program. In her correspondence with other chapters, local businesses, and with the national branch of the NAACP she repeatedly recited Jarrett's call, "If you believe that Black is brilliant- not just beautiful, if you believe that you do not have an inferior mind, but have one that is equal or superior to anyone else, if you believe in race pride--you must ACT-SO."⁶⁶³ She made time to attend local chapter meetings to discuss and promote ACT-SO. Canson also met with local businesses and larger corporations to raise funds for the program.⁶⁶⁴ Canson took the initiative a step further and launched an initiative called an "assault on ignorance" where she aggressively pushed chapters throughout the Golden State and other western states to adopt ACT-SO into their youth programs.⁶⁶⁵ Under the guidance of Canson, ACT-SO flourished and became extremely popular on the West Coast.

Canson wanted the program to accomplish more and she petitioned the national office for an extension program affiliated with ACT-SO that would be a finishing school for black youth in the West.⁶⁶⁶ This part of the program did not come into fruition, but in the NAACP-WC chapters of ACT-SO local sponsors focused on not only shaping the educational minds of the ACT-SO participants but also their moral minds as well.⁶⁶⁷ Due to

⁶⁶³ Geissinger, found in NAACP-WC Collection.

⁶⁶⁴ I found numerous articles about the program that had pictures of the meeting with Canson in the center of the pictures actively engaged with organizers and students. NAACP-WC Collection.

⁶⁶⁵ Letter from Virna Canson to NAACP Chapter Branches, March 25, 1978, Box 34, Folder 48, NAACP-WC Collection.

⁶⁶⁶ Letter from Virna Canson to Vernon R. De Gruy, April 13, 1978, Box 34, Folder 48, NAACP-WC Collection.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid.

the sponsorship requirements of the program, student selections were based on their educational achievements and involvement in the community. Students who participated in the local NAACP youth chapter, had connections to church, and participated in community service were more likely to receive sponsorship from the local and regional chapter. Young people gravitated to the program because ACT-SO allowed a forum for showcasing their intellectual abilities and the black community eagerly supported the participants. The program permitted students from the eighth thru the twelfth grades to compete in twenty-five different areas, such as social science, performing arts, painting, art, science, arts and humanities. In order to be a competitor, students received sponsorship by an organized local group, church, club, or other organizations. Students met weekly with an “education sponsor” who guided students through the process of preparing for the academic challenge.⁶⁶⁸ They competed at the local level first and then if they were successful advanced to the state level. Winners at the state level traveled to the national competition and local chapters ensured each of these participants received the funding they needed in order to travel and compete. Those who won at the national level received scholarships, which encouraged college attendance. Funding participant travel became an integral concern for Canson and she sought out sponsorship from major corporations for sponsorship. One of her biggest accomplishments came in 1986 when she convinced Richard McGrath, Manager of Special Publics for Chevron USA, to provide an annual grant of \$40,000 that sponsored the travel costs of participants.⁶⁶⁹

⁶⁶⁸ ACT-SO Pamphlet, 1978, Box 34, Folder 38, NAACP-WC.

⁶⁶⁹ “Chevron USA Makes Special Contribution to ACT-SO,” *The Crisis*, 93:8 (October 1986). It should be noted that Chevron has continued to provide annual grants to the ACT-SO program.

ACT-SO not only flourished in the West but within fifteen years the program was found in every major city in the United States. The program's longest legacy came from creating and instilling academic pride in young blacks. In 1987, the program created the Virna M. Canson ACT-SO Award that not only recognized Canson's commitment to the program. The Award is given annually to one participant who has gone above and beyond in contributing to their community.⁶⁷⁰ Ironically, when compared with the state and federal initiatives created to provide educational equality the most successful initiatives came from within the black community.

⁶⁷⁰ ACT-SO Pamphlet, 1986, Box 40, Folder 50, NAACP-WC Collection.

Chapter 8

“Challenging Affirmative Action: The Continuation of White Racism”

“Racism reveals itself in many ways an at all levels of society here in America. Some blatantly express their hatred of Negroes while others utilize their skills to dress the ugly message up with twisted logic. The black man has given so much he gave two hundred free years of labor.”

-Virna Canson⁶⁷¹

As the Western Regional Director of the NAACP, Canson worked tirelessly on a number of agendas in her nine-state-district. The 1970s brought new issues to the forefront, but she remained committed to preserving economic pathways for minorities. She believed a key component for economic freedom was access to higher education. She saw higher education as a necessary for equipping the next generation with the tools they needed to navigate society. Canson focused a great deal of her attention on primary and secondary education in the 1960s, but the 1970s brought forward a different set of issues that threatened minority access in higher education. In primary education, parents claimed they supported integration but when integration plans encroached upon their rights of “freedom of choice” they resisted integration. Parents claimed the state was overstepping their powers and interfering with *their* children’s education and depriving them of their private rights. The perception of freedom of choice bled over into higher education when whites questioned policies that appeared to favor minorities. Canson’s fight to keep educational opportunities open for minorities demonstrates how the changes in political leadership in the state shaped acceptance of race policies.

⁶⁷¹ Letter from Virna Canson to the Editor of The Washington Daily News, October 25, 1968, Box 47, Folder 53, NAACP-WC.

This chapter offers another perspective on “reverse discrimination” in higher education in California. The state’s rapid growth allowed for the creation of plans that developed educational opportunities for all students. However, an unforeseen consequence was the formation of a tiered educational system, which provided better opportunities for white, upper class students. The state university, college and community college system appeared to offer access to all students but also served to establish an educational system favoring whites. The Golden State led the way in passing civil rights legislation before other states and then the state became the first battleground for testing the limits of access in higher education. The 1970s marked the beginning of white “backlash” against affirmative action. The basis of political support for the civil rights agenda fragmented in California as cries of “reverse discrimination” grew louder.⁶⁷²

This chapter connects the *Bakke* case to an acceptance of claims of “reverse discrimination” within larger society. The consequences of the *Bakke* case went beyond higher education and fueled the proliferation of white “backlash” in California and the rest of the nation. The *Bakke* case allowed for the continuation of discriminatory practices against blacks because some whites believed their private rights were being sacrificed for others. This chapter examines the expansion of educational opportunities in higher education in the 1950s, the unraveling of these opportunities with *Bakke*, and connects *Bakke* to the race riot at Taft College to demonstrate the state’s limits to of protecting educational advancement for blacks. Moreover, it also shows the continuation of the black

⁶⁷² Several notable works on the rise of conservatism are: Mary C. Brennan, *Turning Right in the Sixties: The Conservative Capture of the GOP* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); John A. Andrew III, *The Other Side of the Sixties: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of Conservatism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997); and Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

freedom struggle in the Golden State after the triumphs of the Civil Rights Acts. Canson and other black leaders realized white “backlash” and false assertions of “reverse discrimination” were as lethal to the quest for equality as previous practices of discrimination. They discovered the passage of legislation did not change racial attitudes of whites or undo centuries of damage caused by state-sponsored discrimination.

Changing Political Environment in California

By the 1970s, America had experienced two decades of changes since the war and many Americans were disheartened by what they saw. Historian Bruce J. Schulman noted the 1970s, “marked a watershed of modern U.S. history, the beginning of our own time.”⁶⁷³ Americans were disillusioned with the nation’s leadership and doubted the effectiveness of their government. After World War II, Americans believed the nation was a world power, but by the end of the 1960s people feared the country was embroiled in both an internal and external war. The nation experienced the escalation of internal violence with the assassinations of President Kennedy, Senator Bobby Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. In addition, cities all throughout the country erupted in race riots that highlighted the prevalence of urban decay, the continuation of racial tensions, and an inability to keep peace in the inner cities.⁶⁷⁴ People also questioned the nation’s involvement in the Vietnam War and anti-war protests emerged on college campuses. By the late 1960s, support for the anti-war movement grew as the casualty rates climbed and

⁶⁷³ Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 2002), xii.

⁶⁷⁴ Several scholars have covered the shift that occurs in the 1960s and shed light on the grassroots movements that emerged. A few works covering this dynamic are: James H. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992) and Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

people continued to see body bags on the nightly news.⁶⁷⁵ Even leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. questioned the United State's involvement in the war because of the disproportionate number of black soldiers killed and the diversion of funds away from domestic programs. A larger student movement emerged because they did not trust people in positions of power, including the federal government, and they demanded participatory democracy that included the voices of the young.⁶⁷⁶

When Nixon ran for president he portrayed an image of stability and vowed to restore "law and order" but he failed to deliver on his promise to bring peace. Moreover, Nixon disgraced the nation with the Watergate Scandal and Ford's pardon of Nixon further shattered public confidence in the highest office of the land.⁶⁷⁷ The oil embargo sparked fears that the United States' position as a giant in the capitalist world was threatened by oil producing states. The nation was also ensnared in an economic recession an international confidence in the dollar fell and led to "stagflation," where low economic growth was combined with high unemployment rates and high rates of inflation.⁶⁷⁸ For the first time, Americans lost faith in their country and their government.

⁶⁷⁵ Some exemplars of the antiwar movement are: Charles DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990); Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Penny Lewis, *Hardhats, Hippies, and Hawks: The Vietnam Antiwar Movement as Myth and Memory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

⁶⁷⁶ There were several important student movements including the Free Speech Movement and Students for a Democratic Society and Anti-War Movements. Several notable works on rise of student movements are: Robert A. Goldberg, *Grassroots Resistance: Social Movements in the 20th Century America* (Prospects Height, IL: Waveland Press, 1966); Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam, 1993); David Farber, *The Sixties: from Memory to History* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994); and Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁶⁷⁷ For more on Nixon and public perceptions after Watergate see, Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York: Scribner, 2008).

⁶⁷⁸ Stagflation had a significant impact on the working poor and the government struggled to create and economic plan to end stagflation. For more on stagflation see: Jefferson R. Cowie, *Stayin Alive:*

Within this national climate, California's commitment to civil rights waned and also revealed the fight for civil rights was not over. The precariousness of the decade left Californians wondering if the governmental policies assisting minorities actually worked. Other Californians assumed the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968 had already righted racial wrongs and wanted the termination of what they viewed as "special" programs. The doors in education were now unlocked, but larger questions circulated about whether the doors appeared to open wider for minorities. Some Californians alleged admissions policies discriminated against them and flipped the rhetoric of civil rights claiming their rights were violated. They suggested advancements for minorities came at a cost to society as whole and paved the way for reverse discrimination. People did not view special admissions programs as a way to provide equal opportunities to minorities but as programs providing "special" or "preferential" treatment to unqualified applicants.

The Growth of Higher Education in the Golden State

Unsurprisingly, the first case to test affirmative action policies in schools came out of California. California's growth in higher education during the postwar years provided a plethora of educational opportunities for residents. In the postwar years, California's higher educational system grew rapidly to address the needs of a booming population. Several governors realized the state needed more educational institutions to service the needs of the population supported the growth of the educational system. In the late 1940s, Governor Earl Warren invested in the expansion of higher education because he knew the state needed an educated workforce to transition to the postwar economy. Governor Warren knew returning veterans needed professional training to re-enter the work force and promoted an agenda

The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class, (New York: The New Press, 2010) and Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Age of Fracture* (New York: Belknap Press, 2012).

expanding higher education. In order to address the various needs of the student population, a committee consisting of University's Board of Regents and the State Board of Education was formed to formulate a plan to meet the growing enrollment demands. The committee concluded the state should focus on the expansion of small, intimate college campuses that met the needs of the communities they represented.⁶⁷⁹ In 1958, Governor Brown expanded upon Governor Warren's educational initiatives and increased funding for higher education. Brown was a firm believer that, "the absolute destiny of California" was continued economic growth coupled with educational opportunities.⁶⁸⁰

During the 1950s, the state's ten-year projections predicted a spike in college enrollment from 276,000 to 536,000 students.⁶⁸¹ This rapid increase occurred from the postwar baby boom, access to educational assistance for veterans, immigration to California and larger than normal graduating high school class sizes. Governor Brown approached the state legislature, the State Board of Education, the UC Regents, and state college officials and asked them to work together and formulate a long-term plan for educational development.⁶⁸² Several key legislators were also chosen to spearhead an educational committee dedicated to providing the most educational opportunities without increasing wasteful competition and duplication of educational services. Senator George Miller and Assemblywoman Dorothy Donahoe were concerned about the duplication of services and the costs associated with those and suggested a "superboard" to govern both the state

⁶⁷⁹ John Aubrey Douglass, *The California Idea and American Higher Education: 1850 to the 1960 Master Plan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 351.

⁶⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁶⁸¹ Jack Welter, "Master Plan for Education Signed, Praised by Brown," *San Francisco Examiner*, April 27, 1960, 10.

⁶⁸² Douglass, *The California Idea*, 7.

colleges and the university.⁶⁸³ Dorothy grew up in Bakersfield, California a small town of about located forty miles outside of Los Angeles and became active in politics because she wanted children and adults of all ability levels to have access to education. She worked for years on legislation that improved comprehensive educational opportunities throughout the state. Throughout her career, she was committed to helping children with learning and physical challenges and pushed for educational bills focused on addressing the needs of this student population.⁶⁸⁴ She had an intimate connection to these children because as a child she contracted polio, which left her with a life long limp. Throughout her career she was known as “The Voice of Humanity” because she worked tirelessly to fight for the rights of all individuals.⁶⁸⁵

While Dorothy was in the State Assembly, she was one of only two women serving in the state legislature and worked on committee assignments related to education, ways and means, social welfare, manufacturing and oil and gas. However, one of her biggest contributions was her work on assisting with the development the Master Plan for education. She authored a resolution calling for the creation of a Master Plan that addressed institutional growth and costs. Senator George Miller authored Senate Bill 33, which incorporated the main provisions of the Master Plan. Despite objections from state institutions, Governor Brown signed the plan in April of 1960. Unfortunately, Dorothy

⁶⁸³ Roger L. Geiger, *History of Higher Education: Learning and Culture from the Founding to World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 24.

⁶⁸⁴ In 1955-57 she did a study for the Education Committee’s Subcommittee on the Severely Mentally Retarded and laid out legislative proposals in seven areas: public school programs, state reimbursement to local school districts, advance payments to local districts to begin classes, raising of age to 21 yeas of age, scholarships for teaching and the establishment of the Joint Interim Committee on the Mentally Retarded with funding. Her activism in this area was noted in an oral interview done with Margarete Connolly, “Speaking Out for Retarded Citizens,” Interview by Julie Shearer, Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1984.

⁶⁸⁵ For her work as legislature the *Los Angeles Times* named her “Woman of the Year” in 1959.

passed away from complications from pneumonia before the signing of the bill and they honored her work by naming the bill after her.⁶⁸⁶ Governor Brown called the Donahoe Higher Education Act, “the most significant step California had ever taken in planning for the education of our youth.”⁶⁸⁷

The goal of the Master Plan was an educational system combining exceptional academics with broader access for students. To accomplish this goal, the committee demarcated the roles and functions of the University of California, California State University, and Community Colleges.⁶⁸⁸ The Master Plan established a tripartite educational system and instructed the University and State colleges to set aside their differences and draw up plans for future growth.⁶⁸⁹ The legislature declared the University of California system was the primary state-supported agency for research and the top one eighth of California high school graduates were guaranteed admission to a UC. The California State University system provided the second tier option for students seeking a four-year degree and they could offer master’s programs. The California Community Colleges provided access to high-quality education after high school for other students who did not meet the academic standards for a four-year institution.⁶⁹⁰

The committee also wanted affordable options for college to allow students, even those who were late bloomers or with grade deficiencies, a chance to carry on with their

⁶⁸⁶ Several universities were reluctant to consent to the plan because they did not want to lose their autonomy. One work that examines this issue is: John Douglass, *The California Idea and American Higher Education, 1860 to the 1960 Master Plan* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2000).

⁶⁸⁷ Sacramento UPI, “Brown Oks Master Plan for Schools,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 27, 1960, 10.

⁶⁸⁸ Richard Rodda, “Governor Signs Education Plan” *Sacramento Bee*, April 27, 1960.

⁶⁸⁹ Sacramento UPI, “Dorothy Donahue, Assemblywoman, Dies of Pneumonia,” *Redlands Daily Facts*, April 5, 1960, 1.

⁶⁹⁰ William Zumeta and Deborah Frankle, *California Community Colleges Making Them Stronger and More Affordable* (San, Jose, CA: The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2007).

education. This benefitted minority students who were disproportionately placed into classrooms and programs that did not promote college readiness.⁶⁹¹ In addition, the legislature increased the amount of Cal-Grant aid for students attending public or private institutions.⁶⁹² Cal-Grant aid allowed students who met grade and financial aid requirements to receive funds for books, tuition and a small stipend that covered additional fees. Students who went junior colleges and successfully completed their two-year degree were guaranteed admission to a UC or CSU. While the plan recognized economic hardships confronted students, it did not challenge the persistence of racial discrimination.

Affirmative Action in Higher Education

The Master Plan greatly increased the number of educational opportunities for Californians. However, one consequence of the plan was the creation of two-tiered system where whites had access to four-year institutions and baccalaureate degrees and disadvantaged minorities were relegated to community colleges. Educators realized this trend and attempted to resolve the issue with admissions policies, which factored in race and socioeconomic status. These procedures reflected Affirmative Action policies that emerged in the 1960s. Affirmative Action policies developed because people alleged society as a whole benefitted from providing the poor and powerless with opportunities for advancement. President Kennedy introduced the concept when he ordered federal contractors to take “affirmative action to ensure that applicants are treated equally without regard to race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.”⁶⁹³ President Johnson expanded

⁶⁹¹ John Douglass, *The California Idea and American Higher Education, 1860 to the 1960 Master Plan* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2000)

⁶⁹² 1960 Donahoe Act, Amendment to the California State Education Code: Sections 22500-22705, Statutes and Amendments to the Codes. 1960. Calisphere.

⁶⁹³ Quoted in Terry Anderson, *Pursuit of Fairness: A History of Affirmative Action* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 61.

affirmative action programs because he believed these were essential for rectifying past discriminations against minorities. In a commencement address at Howard University he told = students, “You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of the race and then say, ‘you are free to compete with the others,’ and still justly believe you have been completely fair.”⁶⁹⁴

Many university administrators agreed with President Johnson and acknowledged previous admission’s policies discriminated against minorities and excluded them from higher education. Educators took a proactive stance on promoting equality and producing a more diverse learning environment. Universities attempted to recruit more minorities, but discovered they needed to implement other policies to increase the minority population. They established dual admissions programs enabling minority students to attend college in greater numbers.⁶⁹⁵ In 1964, the University of California, Berkeley instituted an Education Opportunity Program, which allowed the university to select two percent of their incoming freshman from applicants who did not meet their eligibility requirements.⁶⁹⁶ The program also provided entering freshmen that qualified for financial need with work-study jobs.⁶⁹⁷ Several University of California law and medical schools implemented admission policies that took into account the economic and racial status of applicants. The University of California, Davis (UC Davis) introduced perhaps the most well known admissions program in their medical school. UC Davis’ medical school included a special admissions program

⁶⁹⁴ Lyndon B. Johnson, “Commencement Address at Howard University: ‘To Fulfill These Rights,’” June 4, 1965, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States; Lyndon B. Johnson, 1965, Vol. 2* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1966), 635-640.

⁶⁹⁵ Howard Ball, *The Bakke Case: Race, Education, and Affirmative Action* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2000), 6.

⁶⁹⁶ G. Louis Heath, “Berkeley’s Educational Opportunity Program,” U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Office of Education, iles.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED041986.pdf

⁶⁹⁷ G. Louis Heath, “Berkeley’s Educational Opportunity Program.” 7.

that set aside 16 of their 100 student openings every year for a minorities students, which included blacks, Chicanos, Asians, American Indians, and those with financial need.⁶⁹⁸

These programs led to the acceptance of greater numbers of minorities in key areas of study such as law and medicine.

However, within a few years whites questioned the criteria used for admitting minorities and argued universities were using “racial preferences” rather than applicant’s qualifications. They claimed these policies created a new unfairness that discriminated against whites. While whites recognized discrimination based upon race was wrong, but they failed to realize the long-term consequences these policies had upon minorities. They chose to ignore centuries of admissions policies that restricted or excluded minorities from higher education and chose to view admissions policies as preferential treatment rather than policies aimed at rectifying past discriminations. They also failed to understand affirmative action programs were put in place to continue the process of dismantling racial divisions. The process was helped by legislation but as long as minorities were excluded from the professional and social elite, white privilege and power would dominate the social, political, and economic landscape. Furthermore, universities believed increasing the number of black professionals would lead to positive impacts in the larger black community. Philosopher Donald Dworkin summed up this line of reasoning in his writings and suggested, “increasing the number of blacks who are at work in the professions will, in the long run, reduce the sense of frustration and injustice and racial self-consciousness in the black community.”⁶⁹⁹

⁶⁹⁸ Anderson, *Pursuit of Fairness*, 6.

⁶⁹⁹ Ronald Dworkin, “Why Bakke Has No Case,” *New York Review of Books*, November 10, 1977, 15.

Challenging “Reverse Discrimination”

The most famous Supreme Court case challenging affirmative action came out of northern California. In 1974, 33 year-old Allan Bakke applied to twelve different medical schools. He was an ex-marine with two engineering degrees and he wanted to pursue a medical degree. Unfortunately, Bakke received rejection letters from every single school. Despite being rejected from all twelve schools, Bakke believed that he was a qualified applicant. He claimed he was a victim of “reverse discrimination,” where minorities received “special privileges” at the expense of more qualified Whites.⁷⁰⁰ The *Bakke* case became the landmark Supreme Court case on the use of racial quotas in university admission’s policies. The *Bakke* case is well known now as *the* case to challenge reverse discrimination. However, the fact that *Bakke* became *the* case accelerating claims of “reverse discrimination” is bewildering given the specifics of the case. However, the *Bakke* case does demonstrate how shifts in the political climate shaped the outcome and interpretation of the verdict over time.

When Allan Bakke received his rejection letter from UC Davis it was not his first rejection letter from the school, he applied the year before and was rejected. As noted before, Bakke did not get into any of the twelve schools he applied. Unfortunately, Bakke was already in his thirties and knew most medical schools had age restrictions in their admission’s procedures. Bakke knew about these restrictions and he was concerned his age would preclude his admission. He wrote to several schools, including UC Davis, to inquire whether his age would hurt his chances for acceptance. The dean from UC Davis

⁷⁰⁰ Several scholars have written about the *Bakke* case several of the more notable works are: J. Harvie Wilkinson, *From Brown to Bakke: The Supreme Court and School Integration, 1954-1978* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981) and Howard Ball, *The Bakke Case: Race, Education, and Affirmative Action* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 2000).

responded to Bakke's question and informed him that the UC Davis Medical School did not have a fixed age limit but, "his age is a serious factor which must be considered... The Committee feels that an older applicant must be unusually qualified to be seriously considered for one of the limited number of places in the entering class."⁷⁰¹ Most of the medical schools denied his admission on the basis of his age and even some of the UC Davis officials cited his age as the factor for his rejection.⁷⁰²

Despite the fact Bakke applied multiple schools and received rejection letters from every institution, he chose to file suit in California and test the legality of Davis' special admission program. Bakke challenged UC Davis' admission process where they reserved sixteen spots for disadvantaged minorities. He believed this process eliminated him from the pool of qualified applicants and led to his rejection. Bakke argued these sixteen spots were given to students less qualified than Bakke. Bakke used the words "reverse discrimination" to refer to this policy. He suggested the school's affirmative action admissions policies, which meant to open doors, actually closed the doors for more qualified students. He claimed the policy denied his constitutional right to equal treatment because he was white, and his rejection was not based upon his qualifications. The California Supreme Court agreed with Bakke and struck down the university's admissions policy. The court ruled the policy was unconstitutional because it used racial discrimination as a marker for determining eligibility. UC Davis vehemently disagreed with the court's ruling and filed an appeal. Ultimately, the case found its way all the way to the Supreme Court and led to national debates over "reverse discrimination," "preferential" treatment

⁷⁰¹ Quoted in Rebecca Steffoff, *The Bakke Case: Challenging Affirmative Action* (New York: Marshall Cavendish, 2006), 56.

⁷⁰² Peter Irons, *The People's History of the Supreme Court* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 451.

and “quotas.”

The university denied their dual admissions process led to Bakke’s rejection. The university argued other factors, besides test scores and grades, were used to determine suitable applicants. They noted each applicant went through an interview process and was assessed on the applicant’s communication skills, level of compassion, and their commitment to a particular field of research. The chairman of the admission’s committee who interviewed Bakke concluded, “Bakke (was) ‘rather limited in his approach’ to the problems of the medical profession and found disturbing Bakke’s ‘very definite opinions which were based more on his personal viewpoints than upon a study of the total problem.’”

⁷⁰³ The university using other criteria, Bakke was not a qualified applicant. Despite the university’s assertions, Justice Powell concluded that there was “no question” that the sixteen seat special program was the “sole reason” for Bakke’s rejection. ⁷⁰⁴ However, the court also ruled that race could still be used as a factor in considering applicants but outlawed the usage of set quotas.

For Canson, the outcome of *Bakke* involved more than one single individual; it affected a whole class of people.⁷⁰⁵ Even though the court ruled universities could still use race as a factor, the case opened the floodgates for others to challenge the legality of admission’s policies. Dismayed, she recognized that the court’s decision was a massive blow to opportunities for all minorities in higher education. Canson, as well as numerous other civil rights leaders throughout the state and nation, pushed the university to appeal the decision. In a statement she delivered to the University of California Board of Regents she

⁷⁰³ Regents Of The University Of California v. Bakke, 438 U.S. 265.

⁷⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁵ Letter by Virna Canson to Regional Branches, 1978, Box 34, Folder 1, NAACP-WC.

conveyed to them that the progress of the 1960s had slowed and called on the university to rise above the pressure and become leaders. She remarked, “ As we begin to see light at the end of this long dark tunnel what kind of model would the University present to the world if it caved in; what kind of model would the men, women and youth of the NAACP in the great Western Region present if we caved in?”⁷⁰⁶

Canson was baffled on how *Bakke*, which was a weak case, showed discriminatory practices at the University of California. Years later, in her oral history she remarked:

Bakke had a right to challenge sixteen spots, and not challenge eighty-four. What about the whole business of the process of how you get into the university, how fair is that. What about age discrimination? What about all of these other kinds of things? But it’s like a magnet, it draws you into the arena where your opposition, is, and can get you ground into a pulp.⁷⁰⁷

Canson did not know why Bakke’s lawyers did not use age discrimination as the basis for their case. His lawyers did not even address practices the dean of the law school used for his own special admission process, which gave him to power to admit five to six applicants of his choice. Peter Storandt, the former assistant dean at Davis who reviewed Bakke's application revealed to *The Voice* that Bakke’s rejection might have occurred because of the dean’s preferential appointments rather than the special admission policy. In 1973, the dean admitted a student to the school that had not even submitted an application. According to newspaper sources, Bakke's attorney was unaware of the dean's practices when they filed the suit. His attorney, Reynold Colvin, reported that he did not know about the practices but even if they had the dean’s practices had no bearing on the case.⁷⁰⁸ A year later, the UC President David Saxon intervened to tighten the school's admissions procedures and

⁷⁰⁶ Virna Canson, “Statement to the Board of Regents on the Matter of Reconsideration of The Appeal of the Bakke Case,” November 18, 1976, UCLA Campus, Box 34, Folder 2, NAACP-WC.

⁷⁰⁷ Virna Canson, “Waging the War,” 46.

⁷⁰⁸ “White Admission Thwarted Bakke,” *Oakland Post*, October 2, 1977, 1.

discontinued the dean's practice of admission. However, the dean's practice highlighted admission procedures that occurred at every institution, which gave admission's concessions to alumni, donors, and people in high positions.

Interpreting Bakke in the Haze of White Backlash

Canson remarked that the *Bakke* case, "created a climate of confusion and negativism where the enemies of affirmative action in employment and special admissions programs in education have pounced on these programs like hungry wolves."⁷⁰⁹ Ultimately, the *Bakke* ruling did not signal an end to affirmative action policies but opened the doors for others to assert they were victims of "reverse discrimination." Due to the ambiguity of the ruling, the *Bakke* case also brought forward questions about the stability and longevity of Affirmative Action policies. The court itself was divided in their five to four decision and their ruling did not answer larger questions about the legality of affirmative action programs. Some educators believed the *Bakke* ruling coupled with the Reagan administration's lack of enthusiasm for affirmative action programs meant schools would slow efforts to recruit minority students.⁷¹⁰ In the wake of the *Bakke* decision, some institutions shifted the focus of the justification for special admissions policies and argued these policies were not in place to address past discrimination but created a diverse student population, which benefitted the entire student body. This approach suggested diversity increased other student's future career success, increased the student's knowledge base, and

⁷⁰⁹ "Reaction Mixed on Acceptance of Bakke Case," *The Los Angeles Times*, February 23, 1977, 22.

⁷¹⁰ Richard Carelli, "What Top Court Does Not Say May be Key in Justices' Bakke Decision," *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, June 27, 1978, 3.

prepared students for modern life.⁷¹¹ Despite the academy's insistence on diversity on the college campus, *Bakke* opened the door for others to challenge admissions policies.

Reverse discrimination infiltrated the rhetoric of the New Right who used the ideology as one of their principle weapons for attacking affirmative action policies. Infuriated by these tactics, Canson stated, "The furor starts when blacks and other minorities seek to fulfill their desire for professional training."⁷¹² She believed Whites benefitted from years of special admission policies that denied blacks entrance into schools altogether, and within a few short years of "equal" access White society sought to take back this privilege.⁷¹³ Canson lost faith in the ability of the White society to accept blacks as first class citizens and realized that governmental policies and legislation only represented half of the educational battle. These gains could quickly be reversed by court decisions that favored the "majority."⁷¹⁴ The issue of affirmative action was interpreted, misinterpreted, and comingled with subtle racism and fears over competition. She knew people would misinterpret the *Bakke* decision and wrote, "Some are using quotas and affirmative action interchangeably to deliberately confuse the two."⁷¹⁵ Canson pushed for the university to appeal the decision and created informational pamphlets explaining the details of the *Bakke* case.

⁷¹¹ Judith Eaton, "The Evolution of Access Policy: 1965–1990," in *Public Policy in Higher Education*, edited by L. F. Goodchild and others (Needham Heights, Mass.: Pearson Custom Publishing, 1997), 237–46.

⁷¹² "University of California Admissions Policy To Cut Rolls of Minority Students, *New York Times*, October 21, 1977, from ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2007), (Accessed Retrieved April 23, 2011).

⁷¹³ "University of California Admissions Policy," *New York Times*, 1977.

⁷¹⁴ Letter from Virna to Charles M. Rossie, Jr., Box 10, Folder 20, NAACP-WC Collection.

⁷¹⁵ Virna Canson, letter to the Editor, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 8, 1973, 6.

However, the *Bakke* case revealed public opinion had started to change and cries of “reverse discrimination” grew louder. Gallup Polls conducted in the aftermath of *Bakke* revealed most Americans believed minorities had access to the same educational opportunities as Whites. In April of 1978, pollsters asked respondents, “In your opinion, do black children and other minorities in this community have the same educational opportunities as white children?” Pollsters reported eighty percent of the respondents replied yes.⁷¹⁶ Armed with the charge of reverse discrimination, other applicants challenged admission’s practices. In 1975, Glen DeRonde applied to the University of California’s Martin Luther King Law School at Davis and was rejected. He was one of 2,238 applicants seeking enrollment and only 406 applicants received offers of admission. In July of 1975 he filed suit in the Yolo County Superior Court against the Regents of the University of California and the Dean of King Law School. He claimed that the university’s selection procedures were unconstitutional and gave unfair advantages to minority students. The school used a formula, which combined an applicant's previous academic grade point average (GPA) with their score on the standardized law school admissions test (LSAT). This formula yielded a predicted first year average (PFYA), which measured the applicant’s potential for success in school. In addition to the PFYA the university considered other factors such as economic disadvantage and ethnic minority status. The lower courts heard his case and ruled that DeRonde did not meet the standard criteria for admission. In

⁷¹⁶ Steve Crabtree, ed. “The Gallup Brain: Bakke and Affirmative Action,” January 28, 2003, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/7660/Gallup-Brain-Bakke-Affirmative-Action.aspx>.

addition, the court found that more than 800 students who were rejected and 35 of these were minority applicants with higher scores than DeRonde.⁷¹⁷

DeRonde appealed the lower courts decision but the appeals court also rejected DeRonde. However, the appeals court muddied the legal waters when they declared that any form of favoritism to minority applicants was unconstitutional. Judge James G. Changaris quoted the California constitution, “ Any citizen or class of citizens may not be granted privileges or immunities not granted on the same terms to all citizens.”⁷¹⁸ His decision signaled a change in the courts and opened the doors for others to challenge admissions policies on that included race as a factor. DeRonde appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court because he argued that the *Bakke* decision was not working and that it was still allowing universities to discriminate against white students. In an telephone interview with a paper, he claimed, “ It’s fine to discriminate against Caucasians as long as you don’t call it a quota.”⁷¹⁹ DeRonde recognized something that NAACP leaders also saw; “we’ve got a Republican president now. All it takes is another nominee and perhaps the Bakke decision would be reversed.” Canson noted the *DeRonde* decision stood for the principle that “institutions not only may but should move forward affirmatively to remedy the results of past discrimination.”⁷²⁰

The Clancy case was the second “reverse discrimination” suit filed against the University of California. In 1977, Rita Clancy a 22 year old, Russian immigrant applied to UC Davis’ medical school. She did not get into the school, but she was placed at the top of

⁷¹⁷ DeRonde v. Regents of University of California, 28 Cal.3d 875

⁷¹⁸ “Reverse Discrimination Spurs New Legal Clash,” SF, April 23, 1980,

⁷¹⁹ “White Lawyer Hopes High Court will Reverse *Bakke* Ruling,” *San Bernardino County Sun*, February 13, 1981, A-8.

⁷²⁰ Ibid.

the wait list. Clancy believed she was more qualified than other applicants and questioned her rejection. She used Bakke's argument and claimed the special admission process setting aside 16 seats gave a disadvantaged minority her spot. An affidavit from the university filed in courts stated Mrs. Clancy was the first student on one of four waiting lists used to determine admittance for 84 openings not covered by the minorities program. U. S. District Court Judge Thomas McBride heard the case and agreed the university's policy led to her rejection. He ordered the UC Davis Medical program to immediately admit Clancy. McBride ruled there was "a good likelihood Mrs. Clancy would have been admitted if the program had not reserved 16 of its 100 slots for disadvantaged minorities."⁷²¹ McBride's assessment that there was a "good likelihood" neglected to take into account other factors the university used to assess candidates and diminished the power of the admissions board.

Canson was floored by the Judge McBride's decision and publicly lambasted the ruling. She noted the ruling did not take into account how whites benefitted from years of "special admission" policies. She submitted a written statement:

Special admissions for sons and daughters of alumni, especially rich alumni, football players, baton twirlers, and basketball players are as common with institutions of higher learning in this country as good old American Apple pie. The furor starts when blacks and other minorities seek to fulfill their desire for professional training.⁷²²

Canson warned a crowd assembled for the NAACP Regional Conference in Long Beach about a new problem they now faced. She warned them that there would be a wave of assault against affirmative action in education. She commented, "It is ironic that as the battle cry grows louder from those who parade under the banner of 'reverse discrimination', the University of California moves to put in more restrictive posture in its admission

⁷²¹ "Admission Decision Criticized," *The Bee*, September 26, 1977, 2.

⁷²² NAACP Denounces Order Favoring White College Girl, Sacramento, California, UPI, The Galveston Daily News, September 26, 1977, 2.

standards.”⁷²³ Canson feared cries of reverse discrimination along with court rulings would diminish the university’s commitment to increasing the number of minority students.

Her fears were realized in the late 1970s when the Regents of the University of California moved to implement more astringent admissions policies. They recommended universities place greater weight on standardized test scores than on high school grade point averages. A professor of psychology at University of California, Los Angeles, Allen Parducci, assisted with the policy development and argued for a greater reliance on test scores. He claimed students with marginal scholastic aptitude test scores, “never get in to the intellectual swim” of university life. ⁷²⁴ Canson had already witnessed the public school system’s reliance on testing to determine intelligence and was afraid standardized tests had the same cultural biases as the intelligence tests. She recognized this policy could have adverse affects on students of color and pushed to lobby against the new admissions standards.

Canson searched for an ally on the board to vote against the policy and look to Dr. Wilson Riles, California’s Superintendent of Schools. Dr. Riles, was the first black elected to a statewide office in California and she had worked with Dr. Riles before on other measures. Canson and several other black leaders met with Dr. Riles before the vote to persuade him to vote against the new admission policies. However, he was in favor of the policy because he viewed special admissions programs as a two-tract system that did not help minority students. Riles maintained black boys and girls were capable of producing high-test scores and the policies would not have a negative impact on minorities. He

⁷²³ “ Affirmative Action: We Have Problems We Must Face Together” *The Oakland Post*, November 21, 1976, 2.

⁷²⁴ “ Affirmative Action: We Have Problems We Must Face Together” *The Oakland Post*, November 21, 1976, 2.

remarked, “ It was unfortunate that some persons, don’t expect minorities to be excellent.” He stated, “ I know that black boys and girls can make it, given clear criteria and some assistance. They’re not for some back-door entrance.”⁷²⁵ Riles support of the measure was bitterly contested by Canson and others within the black community.

They disagreed with Riles and argued without considerations for minorities; minority acceptance rates at schools would fall. Canson feared a larger consequence of the admission process was fewer black professionals, which would impact services for the minority community.⁷²⁶ The Regents voted on the issue and narrowly approved the new admissions policies. In fact, Riles cast the deciding vote in favor of the policy. The new admissions policy immediately led to a reduction of the number of minority students admitted to the entering freshmen class in 1979. The policy was bitterly decried by Canson who called the decision, “ the next phase in the dismantling of affirmative action.”⁷²⁷ In a newspaper interview with Edith Austin, Canson broke down in tears when Austin asked her about the vote. Edith reported, “Virna called every black power in California to get them to convince Riles that he was voting wrong - to no avail - Riles did it and remarked – ‘I know I’m committing political suicide, but that’s how I feel.’”⁷²⁸

The Dangers of Playing Ball in California’s Deep South

The political climate changed considerably from the 1960s to the 1970s and whites were unwilling to relinquish their power. In a letter to Governor Reagan, one woman revealed a the continuation of racism in the state she wrote, “ If you give them an inch they take a mile, this is a characteristic of the race and no amount of teaching can change this

⁷²⁵ Ibid.

⁷²⁶ “Appeal Set on Minority Admissions,” *New York Times*, November 20,1976. 11.

⁷²⁷ “ U. of California Admission Policy to Cut Rolls of Minority Students,” *The New York Times*, October 22, 1977, 9.

⁷²⁸ Edith Austin, “Bay Bits,” *Sun Reporter*, October 27,1977, 9.

one way or the other.”⁷²⁹ White Californians were threatened by demands made blacks for equal opportunity and alleged affirmative action moved blacks and other minorities ahead at a faster pace.⁷³⁰ Within this racial climate, black students suffered in other areas of academics too. From the 1950s to the 1970s, California colleges recruited black athletes to play sports. In some instances, these black athletes were the first blacks in the towns they attended schools. This established an interesting dynamic and tested the limits of racial progressivism. As time wore on the rhetoric of preserving one’s rights gained traction in an alarmingly conservative California and within this environment student athletes found themselves in precarious positions.

One of the most egregious incidents that highlighted the limits of white’s acceptance occurred in Taft. In the 1970s, Taft was a small town with a population of less than 4,000 located nearly sixty miles northwest of Los Angeles. However, the town’s junior college enjoyed a reputation for having a powerhouse football program in California’s junior college division. The school made a concerted effort to build their program in the 1950s and their recruitment efforts out of the region and state. The school understood the connection between winning records and with the ability of the school to raise money. Taft Junior College also realized they had access to incredible athletic talent they could recruit athletes who failed to meet the academic standards of four-year institutions. The school also benefited from generous funding from the oil industry, which gave the college the luxury of giving incoming athletes generous scholarships.⁷³¹ This also allowed Taft to recruit athletes from all over the nation and many of these incoming athletes were black. However, the

⁷²⁹Mrs. Jessie Cavender, Letter to Governor Reagan, January 14, 1967, Box 1967/26; 3, Correspondence Unit; Administrative, RRG, RRL.

⁷³⁰ Formisano, *Boston Against Busing*, 10

⁷³¹ Shavenue Glick, “Taft Bolts Over JC Zoning Rules,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 9, 1965, B3.

town and fans appeared to accept these students. Many locals even invited these young men into their homes for dinner and fans continued to fill the stadium.⁷³²

Taft's recruiting tactics were successful for a number of years and the school enjoyed winning records in both football and basketball. This changed in 1975 when their football team, the Cougars, finished an abysmal season with a 1-8 record. The very same fans that cheered on the Cougars on the gridiron and on the hardwood just a year before turned against the black athletes. Their losing record revealed Taft's racial tolerance was tied to winning records. Without winning records, locals believed black athletes took opportunities from local kids; not just spots on the team but also their educational and funding opportunities. One Taftian spoke about the school and commented they personally had no issue with the recruitment of black athletes but remarked, "There are people in the community who feel that the college should spend more money on its own people." A school official noted the shift, "The town rednecks sweat all day in the oil fields and come home to see these black kids playing football and getting a free education, they are outclassed in their own town and they can't take it."⁷³³ The school officials comment about the town's redneck spoke to a larger issue within the town's demographics and stereotypes they brought with them to Taft. During the 1920s, many of the residents of Taft came from the Dust Bowl states in search of work in agriculture and in the oil fields. By the 1970s,

⁷³² This process occurred throughout the United States at this time due to the growth of institutional sports throughout the nation. This shift has been discussed by: Richard Davis, *Sports in American History: A History* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007); Lane Demas, *Integrating the Gridiron* (Rutgers: Rutgers University Press, 2011); and Charles H. Martin, *Benching Jim Crow* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

⁷³³ Robert Jones, "Taft, Little Town That Chased Blacks Out, Is Confused, Upset," *Los Angeles Times*, June 13, 1975, A3.

there were second and third generation and Taft, like the rest of Kern County; there was still a large southwestern influence in the town.⁷³⁴

Author Gerald H. Haslam grew up in the Central Valley and noted, “The players recruited from elsewhere quickly became a wedge between a segment of the town and the college.”⁷³⁵ The local’s frustration extended beyond black athletes taking away “their” educational opportunities, but they also believed that they crossed understood racial taboos. Several of the black players openly dated white girls. This alarmed locals who frowned down upon interracial dating and believed that the athletes were taking their dates. One local, Riddick, remarked, “They always made passes at girls, even my sister. Mixed company isn’t thought of too highly here.” The local’s reaction in Taft revealed the continued pervasiveness of white fears about blacks encroaching into a white societal landscape.⁷³⁶ Riddick’s comments about “mixed company” were engrained in a longer historical belief about the mixing of the races, which California law supported just a few decades before. California, similar to the rest of the nation, introduced laws prohibiting interracial marriage. As Peggy Pascoe articulated in her work, miscegenation law was a “legal factory for defining, producing and reproducing racial categories for the state.”⁷³⁷ The production of these categories and miscegenation laws further fueled societal notions and white supremacy and purity. California had miscegenation laws in effect until 1948

⁷³⁴ James N. Gregory notes this impact in his work *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁷³⁵ George W. Haslam, *The Other California: The Great Central Valley in Life and Letters* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1994), 127.

⁷³⁶ Ibid. This fear was pervasive throughout the United States and was written about as a sociological problem in Gunnar Myrdal’s work, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Transaction Publishers, 1995).

⁷³⁷ Peggy Pascoe wrote a brilliant work about miscegenation laws entitled, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 9.

when the California Supreme Court ruled in *Perez v. Sharp* that the state's anti-miscegenation statute violated the 14th amendment of the United States. However, the Justices were not all in agreement with the decision and Justice John W. Schenk wrote the dissenting position and stated, "intermarriage between Negro and white persons is incompatible with the general welfare..." The majority opinion agreed that there was "no scientific proof that one race is superior to another in native ability," and pointed out that the offspring of mixed marriages were successful in their communities. Even though the California Supreme Court struck down miscegenation laws, there were still many individuals who were against the mixing of races in relationships.

Riddick and other locals believed that black athletes should not date whites and white tensions about blacks in Taft came to a head on the weekend of May 23rd, 1975. A rumor spread like wildfire throughout the town that one of the black players not only dated a white girl, but that he had also gotten her pregnant. Disgusted by the actions of the young man, several whites gathered at one of the local bars and angrily he had corrupted one of "their" girls. As they continued to drink, tensions mounted and they insisted the young man needed to be taught a lesson. The drunkards departed from the bar in search of the young man or any black man. On the same evening, Joe Williams, a basketball player, and his girlfriend visiting from Bakersfield, went to the local hang out the Sno-White Drive In to enjoy a hamburger and milkshake. As they ate their meal, a car full of the drunks sped toward them and stopped quickly in front of them. The driver yelled racial obscenities and hurled an empty beer bottle at them before he sped away. The bottle narrowly missed the couple and they were both so frightened by the incident that Williams immediately returned

his girlfriend to Bakersfield. The minor incident went unreported but several of the locals continued to discuss how they were intent on seeing justice carried out.⁷³⁸

On Sunday evening, Joe Rhone, a football player from Fort Wayne Indiana, Jerry Cooper, a basketball and football player from Las Vegas, and one of their friends from Bakersfield, Dennis King, left a friend's home after having dinner. They were unaware of the incident on Friday or the growing discontent of the local Taftians. A car with two whites approached them and they yelled at the three friends to get out of their town and to stop dating white girls. They challenged the three friends to a fight, but the Taft Police quickly responded to the confrontation but no arrests were made. The two white males left the scene and continued on to the Sno White Drive In, not to get hamburgers, but to gather more people to go after Rhone, King and Cooper. The three friends were frightened by the threats and decided to head to the dorms for safety. Rhone feared they might be attacked along the way and he placed a twelve gauge sawed off shotgun in a pool case for protection. As they made their way to the dorms, three cars encircled them and a crowd armed with wrenches, clubs, chains, and belts wrapped around their hands descended upon them. Panicked, the three friends attempted to run away but the crowd had them trapped. Rhone was attacked and stabbed on his hand and he swung his pool cue case around to fend off the attackers. As he swung the case, the gun accidentally discharged and hit one of the attackers on the neck. The gunshot startled the attackers and gave the three friends enough of a window to escape. The police were called and Rhone was arrested on suspicion of attempted murder while

⁷³⁸ Report to NAACP, Box 40, Folder 12, Found in NAACP-WC.

only one white youth was arrested for disturbing the three friends. Rhone was later released after they found he was acting in self-defense.⁷³⁹

Word of the shooting spread like wildfire throughout the small community and within a few hours a crowd numbering between 40 to 60 people descended upon the dorm yelling, "Kill the N*." Students in the dorm, both black and white, feared the angry mob would break into the dorm and called the police for help. While they waited for the police to come, Craig Tinson, a well-liked freshman tried to reason with the mob but the mob turned on him. He fled from the mob and was rescued by a white teammate who happened to be driving by. When the police arrived they broke up the crowd but they did not arrest anyone. However, they did take the black students to the police station to protect them from any more potential attacks. One of the students was so terrified that he begged the officer to lock him in a cell so he would be safe. While the students were at the police station they remembered four of their teammates were away for the weekend and called to warn them to stay out of Taft. They contacted all but one teammate, Steve Matson, who was chased by three carloads of whites when he tried to return to campus. Rather than risk another mob attack, the students decided to go to Bakersfield for safety and requested a police escort. At first, the police refused their request but finally agreed to have a squad car follow them. Reports vary as to how long the police provided an escort, but it is clear at some point not too far out of town the police escort made a U-turn and returned to Taft.⁷⁴⁰

After the events the college issued a statement where they called the riot an unfortunate "campus disturbance," which was not connected to the college but was a minor

⁷³⁹ Report to NAACP, Box 40, Folder 12, Found in NAACP-WC.

⁷⁴⁰ Report to NAACP, Box 40, Folder 12, Found in NAACP-WC.

community incident.⁷⁴¹ Despite the college's statement, the 13 black college students refused to return to school that semester and went home without taking their finals. One of the locals, Dennis McCall, was disturbed by the incident and wrote an editorial where he condemned the town for acting like the Ku Klux Klan. After the publication of his editorial, another Taft man attacked McCall with a tire iron while another local Taftian stood guard and warned other students to stay back during the attack. For the next few weeks, students who were deemed as sympathetic to the players were harassed both verbally and physically and the college was forced to place many of these students in local's homes so they were protected.⁷⁴²

However, after a few weeks and with the thirteen students gone, the little town of Taft believed everything was back to normal. Police Chief Walter McKee stated that once the blacks were out of town, he and his eight officers could go back to their regular job of breaking up barroom brawls. The so-called campus disturbance may have remained an unknown race riot, but several of the players returned home to communities with strong activist organizations that demanded a more extensive investigation of the matter. When Canson found out about the riot, she was the Western Regional Director of the NAACP and she started sending letters to other leaders in the area to inform them about the riot. She also sent letter to the District Attorney of California, Evelle Younger, requesting an open an investigation into the matter.⁷⁴³ Several local branches of the NAACP and coaches from other schools united together in a call for a boycott against Taft from all intercollegiate

⁷⁴¹ Jerry K Peavyhouse, President, Letter to the Editor, *Los Angeles Times*, June 25, 1975, D6.

⁷⁴² The details of what occurred are taking from several newspaper accounts that appeared in the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, *The Los Angeles Times* and Joe Jares' article "Violent Return to a Troubled Past," that appeared in *Sports Illustrated* in the June 23, 1975 edition.

⁷⁴³ Letter from Virna Canson to Evelle Younger, December 2, 1975, Located in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, West Coast Region Records, University of California, Berkeley, 40:21.

athletic contests of any sort until a thorough investigation was conducted, criminal charges were filed against the attackers; and called for the resignation of the Taft police chief Walter McKee.⁷⁴⁴ Their efforts were successful in garnering attention and Attorney General Younger and his team conducted an inquiry into the events of the weekend. However, after an extensive investigation Younger and his team concluded the disturbance in Taft was not connected to race, but rather was a personal disagreement between two parties.⁷⁴⁵ The Attorney General's report applauded the town for promoting racial diversity and noted in the aftermath of the incident, Taft College students showed an open acceptance of black students. In addition, the football and basketball coaches had a good relationship with black athletes and they had been able to continue to recruit black students.⁷⁴⁶

However, organizations such as the NAACP and the Black Panthers disagreed with the conclusion and did not view the incident as a campus disturbance nor did they agree with the findings of Attorney General Younger. Canson called the attacks "a startling reminder of earlier times in the long, bitter struggle for equality waged by black Americans, when the welfare of black people was in the hands of 'white racists' who rioted, burned and killed."⁷⁴⁷ She lambasted the report and stated, "It is obvious from the statements of many witnesses that felony and misdemeanor assaults were committed. It does not appear there was any real effort to take crime reports from Black victims or to identify and prosecute the whites responsible."⁷⁴⁸ She accused the Attorney General Younger of overlooking the longer racial history of the community and argued that the state's findings

⁷⁴⁴ Carlton Jones, "Racism Roundup: Black Athletes Boycott Taft," *Sun Reporter*, July 12, 1975, 2.

⁷⁴⁵ "Taft Investigation End Announced," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, January 1, 1976, A2.

⁷⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁷ "State NAACP Head Blames Younger for Racist Violence," *Sun Reporter*, May 22, 1976, 5.

⁷⁴⁸ Peter Magnani, "NAACP Head Seeks State Study of Racist Crime," *Sun Reporter*, January 17, 1976, 4.

were supporting the continued cycle of violence that targeted blacks throughout the entire state.⁷⁴⁹

Frustrated by the findings, Canson did not let the matter go and sent several letters to Attorney General Younger demanding another investigation. However, she did not receive any response to her letters. Canson decided to send one more letter to Younger and also sent a copy of the letter to the newspapers. Younger was angered that she sent the letter to the papers and viewed her action as disrespectful to him. In the past, Canson and Younger corresponded with each other about other issues and their exchanges appeared friendly. In his previous letters to Canson, he wrote in language that showed a sign of respect to her and addressed to her as Mrs. Virna Canson. However, in his response to Canson's letter to the newspapers was riddled with harsh tones and admonishment. From the beginning of his letter it was clear he believed Canson had crossed a line because he did not refer to her with the more polite "Mrs. Virna Canson" as he had in other letters but wrote to her as "Ms. Canson."⁷⁵⁰ Younger was displeased with how she attempted to go around him and wrote, "The Letter dated on Oct. 30,1975 is offensive and insulting. I do not believe that a meeting between us would be productive. You should be aware of the fact that your antagonistic attitude is as disturbing to many others as it is to me."⁷⁵¹ However, he assured her that he believed their investigation was thorough and continued in his letter, "We share your concern over these recent occurrences in Taft, California. On August 5,

⁷⁴⁹ Faith C. Christmas, "NAACP Hits Taft Report," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, January 15, 1976, A-1. For a discussion about the possessive investment of whiteness and the continuation of racism and contemporary whiteness see George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).

⁷⁵⁰ There were several letters in the NAACP-WC Collection between Younger and Canson and I noted the change in how he addressed her after this letter and the cordial, respect present in other letters was missing from his response.

⁷⁵¹ Attorney General Evelle Younger letter to Ms. Canson, November 20,1975, Box 42, Folder 32, NAACP-WC.

1975, we undertook a full-scale investigation concerning the tragic accident.” He informed her that his office had no intention of re-examining the “incident” and he criticized her for sending letters to the press. Younger concluded his letter with, “The fact that you saw fit to send a copy of your Oct. 30th letter to the press doesn’t disturb me at all. It does, however, indicate that you are more concerned with obtaining publicity than with obtaining information.”⁷⁵² Canson was floored by Younger’s reply and dismissal of her request and described his letter as one of the worst she had ever received from a public official.⁷⁵³

The civil rights laws of California and the nation dismantled discriminatory practices in law but the passage of the laws did not unravel cultural practices that were embedded in the societal landscape. In Taft, the community accepted black athletes but within the limited context of black athletes producing winning records. However, when their activities in sports failed to produce the results they wanted and blacks did not abide by their racial etiquette the town’s veneer of racial progressivism shattered and revealed a longer history of policies of exclusion.⁷⁵⁴ Dennis McCall’s editorial condemning the town for returning to its KKK and racist past was an accurate assessment of the longer historical past of Taft.

When whites first established Taft at the close of the Civil War they came from the South and Midwest in search of agricultural and horticultural possibilities and started to

⁷⁵² Ibid.

⁷⁵³ It should be noted that the previous correspondence filed in the NAACP-WC Collection between Attorney General Evelle Younger and Canson was cordial and respectful. The letters from Younger were addressed to Mrs. Virna Canson. The letter he sent to Canson after she sent her letter to the press was addressed to Ms. Canson.

⁷⁵⁴ In the American West laws pertaining to miscegenation stemmed from white cultural assumptions about the nature of race and stigmatized inter-racial dating and marriage. While several works examine these laws several works are Peter Wallenstein, *Tell the Court I love my Wife: Race, Marriage, and Law-An American History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan Trade, 2004); Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

plant cotton. Initially these landowners used Chinese laborers brought in from San Francisco, but within a few years they complained about the high cost and quality of Chinese workers. Two planters who came from Kentucky wanted to bring in workers who understood the cotton culture so they brought in sixty black laborers from Memphis.⁷⁵⁵ Blacks worked the fields for a while but mechanized cotton pickers and Hispanic workers replaced them. Over time the town became an oil-town and locals pushed to keep minorities out of the oil fields. By the 1920s and 1930s, Taft was well known as a sundown town.⁷⁵⁶ When Taft began recruiting black athletes the sundown signs were no longer present, but the census data reveals that little had changed in Taft since the 1930s because there were no permanent residents who were black living in Taft.

In the two years preceding the weekend of violence there were numerous reports made by a number of black and foreign exchange students who stated that they had received threatening phone calls or were targets of verbal abuse; however, there were no reports of violence. In the season just prior to the riot, several black athletes quit school in the middle of the season after an alleged dispute between the Athletic Director –Coach Tom Harrell and his staff. Despite the claims that Taft was a friendly town, even the Chief of Police, McKee later remarked that even though the signs were down now, there was still a lot of resentment and explained that the young men who work in Taft are oil workers who work hard, play hard and believe that the women of Taft are “theirs.”⁷⁵⁷

A few years later, McCall remarked, “ A lot of people here feel that we’ve been dealt a bad rap. They don’t like it when people dig up what has happened, but that’s

⁷⁵⁵ Michael Eissinger, *Kern County: California’s Deep South*, 58.

⁷⁵⁶ Taft’s notoriety as a sundown town was discussed in Olsen Cole Jr.’s work *The African American Experience in the Civilian Corps* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999).

⁷⁵⁷ “Racial Misunderstanding Leads to Violence,” *The Bee*, June 18, 1975, 16.

something we're going to have to live with. Some people are going to remember Taft just like they remember Selma, Alabama."⁷⁵⁸ In many ways, his statement was correct- the only person convicted for a crime was Riddick who attacked McCall, a white person, for the article he wrote. After hours of investigation and hearings conducted by the Kern County Grand Jury, no white was convicted for any charges related to the attack on the black students and officers consistently stated that there were not enough witnesses to prosecute anyone.⁷⁵⁹ Local reports of the riot watered down the riot and called it an incident and repeatedly reported whites felt they were justified in their attacks because the young black men had taken their spot on their team and had dated "their" white girls.

The college attempted to bring the thirteen black students back to the campus but most of them declined. One of the students, Steve Blackburn, said: " I don't think that it will be safe for me or any other black person in Taft for at least a couple of years. Those who cause trouble just won't let up."⁷⁶⁰ When one of the locals was asked what he thought about the possibility of their return and he stated, "If they come back-and I'm not trying to stir things up because I'm out of it- somebody is going to get killed."⁷⁶¹ Unfortunately, what occurred in Taft is not a unique story to California. During that year there were repeated incidents of violent attacks against blacks and an increase in cross burnings throughout the state in both urban and rural areas. Canson, later commented that the continued violence that year occurred because Attorney General Younger chose to ignore what had happened in Taft and endorsed the violence against young black people.⁷⁶²

⁷⁵⁸ Mike Hiserman, "Taft isn't an Ordinary JC Town: What Other California City Shuts Down for Football?," *Los Angeles Times*, December 1, 1983, B 11.

⁷⁵⁹ "Grand Jury Probes Race Riot," *The Bakersfield Californian*, August 7, 1975, 15.

⁷⁶⁰ "California Town Cold to Black Juco Students," *The Kansas City Star*, June 18, 1975, 12.

⁷⁶¹ Ibid.

⁷⁶² Virna Canson, Memo to all Branches on the State of Affairs, July 1979, located in

Chipping Away at Affirmative Action

In the 1970s and 1980s, California's leaders appeared to turn their backs against minorities. In 1981, State Senator John Schmitz approached Justice Mosk, who wrote the court's majority in the Bakke case in which the state court struck down the state's special admission program at the UCD's medical school, for assistance in drafting a state constitutional amendment to bar the use of preferential racial quotas by state agencies. Justice Mosk agreed to help Schmitz and submitted a proposed amendment to hiring policies.⁷⁶³ The proposal he crafted stated, "No privileges or immunities and no benefit or detriment may be granted or withheld in whole or part, on the basis of race, sex, color, religion or national origin by the state of California or any agency thereof."⁷⁶⁴ Justice Mosk sent the proposal to the Senate Constitutional Amendments Committee and stated he was compelled to act because of "excesses adopted in recent years in the name of affirmative action."⁷⁶⁵ He disagreed with the court's new majority for attempting to correct past discrimination through restrictive hiring practices.⁷⁶⁶

Canson and other black leaders were stunned by Mosk's proposal because of his position on the state's supreme court. They viewed his submission of such a proposal as unethical and called for his resignation. On October 24, 1981, Canson filed a complaint with the Commission on Judicial Performance and requested a review of Mosk. She also asked for his removal from the high court. In her letter, she stated, "Mosk 'blatantly' violated his oath of office and unethically campaigning and lobbying to undermine the

⁷⁶³ Jacqueline R. Braitman and Gerald F. Uelman, *Justice Stanley Mosk: A Life at the Center of California Politics and Justice* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2012), 174.

⁷⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁶⁵ "Black Lawmaker Demanding Probe of Justice Mosk," *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, November 3, 1981, 6.

⁷⁶⁶ "Mosk's Hiring Stance Prompts NAACP to Seek his Ouster," *The San Bernardino County Sun*, October 25, 1981, A-11.

constitutional rights of racial minorities.” She suggested that, “If Justice Mosk wished to continue his confrontation over preferential hiring, he should resign.” Canson knew they were embroiled in a critical time because the poor and minorities of the country were faced with increased challenges from the Reagan administration. She pointed out, “The U.S. Supreme Court has stated over and over that something can be done to remedy past discrimination, that some extraordinary steps may be taken.”⁷⁶⁷

Nathaniel Colley spoke on behalf of the NAACP before California lawmakers about Mosk’s proposal. Colley argued the proposal placed public agencies, “ in a straitjacket that would prevent them from removing the lingering effects of discrimination.”⁷⁶⁸ DeRonde also appeared before the assembly in support of the amendment because he claimed that he was a victim of reverse discrimination and “the amendment was the only way to combat a liberal majority on the California Supreme Court.”⁷⁶⁹ Mosk was shocked by the NAACP’s request for his removal and responded to the NAACP’s call for his resignation by resigning from the NAACP. Other leaders also requested his removal from the court and questioned Mosk’s alliance with Schmitz. However, the Commission found that Mosk did not have an ethical lapse but his actions were “lacking in discretion.”⁷⁷⁰

Canson knew from her own experiences that Reagan did not support affirmative action policies. She feared his leadership at the helm of the country threatened to reverse the gains of civil right’s activist. Her fears were not unfounded because the liberal climate of the 1960s gave way to the rise of conservatisms in the 1970s. Reagan’s ascendancy from

⁷⁶⁷ “Mosk’s Hiring Stance,” A11.

⁷⁶⁸ “Emotional Hearing on Discrimination,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, October 28, 1981, 25.

⁷⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁷⁰ “Emotional Hearing on Discrimination,” 25.

an actor to governor signaled a stronger conservative voice in the Golden State. On January 19, 1981, President Reagan gave his first press conference. A reporter asked him if the federal government would retreat from endorsing affirmative action policies. President Reagan responded, “No, there will be no retreat. This administration is going to be dedicated to equality. I think we've made great progress in the civil rights field.” However, he followed up this statement with, “ I think there are some things, however, that may not be as useful as they once were or that may even be distorted in the practice, such as some affirmative action programs becoming quota systems. And I'm old enough to remember when quotas existed in the United States for the purpose of discrimination, and I don't want to see that happen again.”⁷⁷¹ He did not publicly attack affirmative action but his statement was coded in language suggesting the programs replicated discrimination. When Reagan took over it was clear that the position the federal government would take in protecting civil rights would wane as the nation became more focused on cutting internal programs and increasing defense spending.

⁷⁷¹ President Ronald Reagan, The President's News Conference, January 29, 1981, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=44101>.

Chapter 9
Conclusion
“ Returning to Our Roots”

On May 14th, 1984, Canson delivered an impassioned speech to the Democratic Party’s platform in Los Angeles. She had served for decades dedicated to the fight for racial justice and witnessed significant developments towards breaking through racial obstacles. Yet, since the *Bakke* case she also observed mounting resistance and backlash to racial equality. She explained to the crowd, “Our leaders, both black and white, looked at the lifeless form of the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution over 70 years ago and decided that this instrument could be made viable. We looked critically at the systems- the courts, the legislature, the executive (branch)- and decided that we could address our grievances through these systems.”⁷⁷² When President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and 1968 the fight for equality was over in the minds of White Americans. The landmark legislation ended forms of overt discrimination in employment, housing, and voting but it did not change societal perceptions regarding race. Canson knew there were limitations of the Civil Rights Acts and believed the civil rights gains were under assault and the systems they used before to gain access were now set against them. She explained to the crowd, “This attack is underway in agency enforcement, court litigation, legislative initiatives and nominations to Federal positions.”⁷⁷³ Canson was gravely concerned about the place of minorities in a nation where the administration seemed prepared to strip away civil rights legislation.

⁷⁷² Virna Canson, “Experience Has Shown...The NAACP is Leadership the Nation can Trust,” *The Crisis*, 89 (6), (June/July 1982), 18.

⁷⁷³ *Ibid.*

By the 1980s, Canson had spent more years living in California than any other state. She successfully fought for black freedom by utilizing the legal system, direct action protest, and lobbying the state government to dismantle discriminatory practices. In the 1960s, public opinion regarding race relations changed in large part because people were astonished by television coverage of police officers beating, hosing, and releasing dogs on peaceful civil rights activists. Throughout the nation, people celebrated the triumphs of the Civil Rights Movement and many people believed the passage of the Civil Rights Acts constructed an equal playing field. Over time though, the political climate and governmental support for equality waned. By the late 1960s, people were appalled by television coverage of young black youths rioting in America's inner cities. All across the nation, record numbers of Whites responded to fears over black violence by fleeing inner cities.⁷⁷⁴ Moreover, Canson realized California had long since departed from its racially progressive stance in leading the nation in civil rights legislation. For Canson, the state now led the way in chipping away at those legislative gains by using language saturated with buzz words of "freedom of choice" and "reverse discrimination."

The political climate legislation and governmental support for civil rights racial equality waned and white resistance to equality were embedded in language attacking any "preferential" treatment in employment and education. The emergence of "white backlash," which was a legal and social fight against the victories of the civil rights movement, took

⁷⁷⁴ Several scholars have noted the response of whites to increased violence and crime in inner cities. It should be noted that the process of white flight began in the 1950s with suburbanization and accelerated in the late 1960s and 1970s. A few of the more notable works in this area are: Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); and Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

varied forms throughout the state and nation. As historian Carol Horton noted in her work this occurred because postwar liberals, “concentrated attention on purely intentional forms of discrimination rather than those that emerged out of the convergence of more impersonal, social structural factors.”⁷⁷⁵ Canson understood whites lobbying against black equality neglected decades of discrimination and prejudice that prevented equal access to employment and education and focused on current conditions, which they saw as leveling the playing field. This triumphalist tome was supported by the media and suggested that blacks should “get over” past discriminations like the rest of the nation and move forward. People assumed the civil rights acts instantaneously rectified centuries of oppression, but failed to realize how larger systemic issues still produced avenues for the continuation and proliferation of discriminatory practices. Whites were systematically more mobile than blacks and have not recognized the perpetuity of white privilege even if it is being perpetuated by Americans’ unconsciousness. Further complicating matters, as law professor Stephanie Wildman notes, “The notion of privilege...has not been recognized in legal language and doctrine.”⁷⁷⁶ The state’s citizens and politicians were unwilling give up white privilege. They carefully coded their efforts in language of *their* “freedom of choice” and “reverse discrimination.” As noted before, Canson realized long before legal scholar, Derrick Bell gave it the name of interest convergence theory that Whites were willing to accept racial equality but only as long as this converged with their interests.⁷⁷⁷

⁷⁷⁵ Carol Horton, *Race and the Making of American Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 138.

⁷⁷⁶ Stephanie M. Wildman, *Privilege Revealed: How Invisible Preference Undermines America* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 8.

⁷⁷⁷ Derrick Bell called this interest-convergence theory and set the foundation for scholars to discuss these issues by introducing critical race theory. Several of his more notable works include *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

Canson knew prejudice and discrimination still existed and the black community needed to produce their own paths. Later in her life, she focused her attention on establishing strong black institutions so the next generation was equipped to excel in their community and in society. She harkened back to the ideals of black institutional building and leadership she learned as a child in Oklahoma and concentrated on producing long-term permanent changes within the black community. These pathways were essential because they were outside of white control and interference and allowed for healthy community growth. Affirmative action policies in admission were already precarious and in the number of college applicants in the 1980s spiked, which led to more astringent admission's standards. Canson did not witness the passage Proposition 209, which banned affirmative action in California, but she saw the impact that *Bakke* had on colleges despite their claim's they were committed to diversity. She sought out alternatives outside the university for minorities to break into better employment opportunities.

Canson recognized the role that technology was having in transforming the U.S. economy. California stood at the forefront of the technological revolution and minorities were being left out of the technological fields. Companies recruited employees from the University of California's schools, but there were fewer minorities in the UC system and this led to fewer minorities in the technological field. In 1981, the national branch of the NAACP initiated operation "Fair Share," which had the goal of establishing relationships with companies.⁷⁷⁸ Canson took this initiative seriously and reached out to Pacific Bell in 1984. Pacific Bell was the largest telephone and telecommunications company in the United States and they hired thousands of employees in California. After a series of talks with the

⁷⁷⁸ Colin Potter, "Companies Making a Fair Share Difference," *The Crisis* 102: 3 (April 1995): 26-29

company, Canson brokered the historic “fair share” agreement, which was signed at the NAACP’s national convention in Kansas City. Under the fair share agreement, Pacific Bell issued a proclamation declaring their commitment to “equal opportunity” and “pledged cooperation in seeking increased purchasing, training and mutual business benefits for all minorities.”⁷⁷⁹ The company agreed to actively hire more black managers and use more minority vendors. They also vowed to use equal opportunity practices in hiring. In order to increase the number of minorities, they pledged to increase training opportunities for minorities. The agreement was a historic event within the NAACP because it was the first of its kind between the organization and a large corporation. Pacific Bell kept their pledge and increased minority-recruiting effort with an emphasis on three major strategies, recruitment of black managers, recruitment of black managers, and recruitment of members into the NAACP itself.⁷⁸⁰

One of the challenges Pacific Bell faced was locating minority owned businesses that sold technological products and services. They wanted to use minority owned businesses; however, they discovered there were few minority technological companies in existence. To address this issue, Pacific Bell assembled a task force that looked at ways to increase the number of high tech minority contractors and vendors. The Minority Business Task Force comprised of twelve members from diverse professional backgrounds. They chose Dr. Al. Osborne, Associate Dean of University of California, Los Angeles’ Graduate School of Management, to chair the committee. Dr. Osborne joined the committee because

⁷⁷⁹ Pat Mott, “ Pacific Bell in Historic Fair Share Commitment,” *The Crisis* 92: 2 (May 1985):16. It should be noted though that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which prohibited employment discrimination and created the Equal Opportunity Commission. However, similar to other legislation minorities had to prove they were discriminated against and little change in the area of hiring.

⁷⁸⁰ Ibid.

as he commented it was, “Rare that a corporation shows the vision to take the long view in matters like these. They’re asking the right questions now and therefore they’re building a good procurement and vendor base for the future.”⁷⁸¹ Through the work of the task force the company established contacts with smaller institutions within the California State University system because there was a higher number of minority students enrolled in these schools. Pacific Bell also began an internship program for third year college students that allowed students to work with managers. During the first quarter of 1984, the company spent 13.5 million with businesses run by both minority and female suppliers. The company implemented a five-year plan to expand its minority and women’s business enterprise procurement program with planned to allocate \$300 million going to such businesses during that time.⁷⁸²

The program continued at Pacific Bell and minorities were hired in increasing numbers. During the program’s first ten years, the number of minority managers increased from 17.5 percent to 28.2 percent. In 1990, the Department of Labor’s Office of Federal Contract Compliance Program recognized their efforts and awarded Pacific Bell with the Exemplary Voluntary Efforts (EVE) award. In 1983 the EVE awards began as a way to recognize federal contractors and subcontractors who voluntarily started their own affirmative action programs.⁷⁸³ By the 1990s, Pacific Bell became one of the largest private employers of women and minorities in California, 72 percent of its employees were women or minorities.⁷⁸⁴

⁷⁸¹ Mott, “ Pacific Bell in Historic Fair Share Commitment.”

⁷⁸² Ibid, 16.

⁷⁸³ Wayne Cascio, *Managing Human Resources: Productivity, Quality of Work Life, Profits*, (New York: McGraw- Hill, 2012), 71.

⁷⁸⁴ Potter, “Companies Making a Fair Share Difference.”

In addition to creating pathways in the technological industry, Canson also sought to increase opportunities for blacks in another lucrative business in California- the movie industry. Canson assisted the Beverly Hills-Hollywood Branch of the NAACP in their fight against discrimination in the motion picture industry. The Beverly Hills-Hollywood Branch created an annual awards program known as the Image Awards, which was designed to recognize the work of blacks in motion picture, television, and the recording industry. The Image Awards grew out of a larger frustration where blacks found themselves unable to break racial employment barriers and the stereotypical casting of blacks and other minorities. The awards were created to recognize those individuals who promoted and supported positive portrayals and advancement of blacks in Hollywood.⁷⁸⁵ In 1981, the Image Award program did not see any meaningful roles in the category of Best Actress and refused to nominate anyone to the category.⁷⁸⁶ Participants in the selection process did not see blacks in any significant role in an American production. In 1980 Cicely Tyson of “Bustin Loose” was the only actress to have a starring role.⁷⁸⁷ Under Canson’s regional leadership, the NAACP worked to pressure the entertainment industry into expanding the number of quality roles for persons of color.⁷⁸⁸

The NAACP formed a task force to examine the issue further and to formulate a plan for opening doorways in Hollywood. The task force included Tom Atkins, General Counsel, Ms. Geraldine Green, president of the Beverly Hills-Hollywood Branch of the NAACP, Ms. Colette Wood, Executive Director of the Beverly Hills- Hollywood branch

⁷⁸⁵ “25th NAACP Image Awards Silver Anniversary Voting Process,” *The Crisis* 102: 8 (Nov-Dec. 1992): 5.

⁷⁸⁶ “Enduring Industry Pressure,” *Sacramento Observer*, April 16, 2003, 10.

⁷⁸⁷ Phyllis Bailey, “NAACP Meets with Studio Officials,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 11, 1982, A4.

⁷⁸⁸ “Enduring Industry Pressure,” *Sacramento Observer*, April 16, 2003, 10.

and Canson.⁷⁸⁹ The task force drew attention to the lack of blacks in Hollywood both in front of and behind the camera. They called for more blacks to be hired in technical, support, and craft positions. They also assembled a “white list” that showed how the forty-three films produced in Hollywood in the previous month excluded blacks. Armed with this information, Canson made arrangements to meet with the Walt Disney Production and approached other companies such as ABC, AVCO-Embassy, Columbia, MGM-UA, Twentieth Century Fox, Universal, and Warner Brothers.⁷⁹⁰

As they continued to probe the hiring practices of the motion picture industries, Canson was convinced that the task force had assembled enough information to call for a NAACP boycott of the motion picture industry. Black actors had limited roles in films and black women had even fewer roles in film. In 1981-1982 only one black woman starred in a feature film, Jayne Kennedy. However, this did not show Hollywood’s expansion of roles for black women because Kennedy starred in the film “Body and Soul” which was produced by her husband. The task force decided the best way to address the lack of black representation in Hollywood was to schedule a boycott. However, the boycott was averted when the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) agreed to meet with the NAACP task force to discuss their grievances. The task force met with the president of the MPAA Jack Valenti, in January of 1982. Valenti claimed blacks were no more than 11 percent of the film-going audience and given this number that blacks were well represented in films. However, the NAACP suggested that the black box office power was higher around 30-

⁷⁸⁹ “NAACP Mulling Boycott of Movie Industry,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 30, 1982, 1.

⁷⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

percent of the movie going public.⁷⁹¹ Despite the differences in the numbers between the NAACP and the MPAA, the MPAA had a hard time disagreeing with discrimination claims. After two meetings with Valenti, the task force concluded they needed to meet with the individual production companies rather than just the MPAA.

As they continued their investigation, the task force uncovered discrimination in the casting calls for movies. In 1982, the production company for the movie “The Right Stuff” held casting calls explicitly asking for “Caucasians Only”. The description for the call explicitly stated, “ You must be over 18 years of age. Caucasian and able to spend the day having fun.” The movie was based upon a novel of the same title and followed the evolution of the space age program and growth of aviation. The task force learned given the nature of the military setting in the book that the movie was going to use Edwards Air Force Base for some of their filming locations. Upon further investigation, they discovered several agencies within the Defense Department cooperating with the production company in the filming, such as NASA and the Navy. They believed the practice of discrimination in the casting call crossed the line and violated federal statutes because the movie was using federal property and agencies.

The NAACP’s Benjamin Hooks, Executive Director and Canson, Western Regional Director, sent a telegram to the Director of Public Information requesting a full investigation of this matter. They also asked for a complete investigation into the matter from the Department of Defense⁷⁹² Canson and Hooks were committed to ensuring blacks had access to positive roles in film because they both knew the power media had on shaping

⁷⁹¹ Curtis E. Rodgers, Esq. “NAACP vs. Hollywood, 2 Studios Sign Pact with NAACP, So You Want to be in the Movies,” *The Crisis* 90:1 (January 1983): 7.

⁷⁹² “NAACP Requests Probe of ‘The Right Stuff’ Filming,” *Jet*, 62:16 (June 28, 1982): 45.

societal perceptions. Blacks were continually left out of movies and when they were cast in films they were placed within stereotypical roles such as thugs, brash women, domestics, and the sidekick, which only served to reinforce those stereotypes.⁷⁹³ Canson called for accurate portrayals of blacks and demanded that Hollywood stop using blacks in stereotypical roles because these roles reinforced notions of inferiority. Segregation still existed in schools, employment and in housing and for some Americans the only blacks they saw were in films. Canson wanted to elevate roles for blacks and commented, “The NAACP is determined to raise the level of consciousness of the entire movie industry so that true stories about the roles of Blacks in all walks of life will be told and more employment and other contractual arrangements with studios will be available for Blacks.”

⁷⁹⁴ In 1983, the NAACP brokered fair-share agreements with Walt Disney Productions and MGM/UA Communications Co. In both of the agreements, the studios made a commitment to initiate or expand opportunities for minorities in management, employment, philanthropic contributions, and film and television production amongst other things.⁷⁹⁵ The agreements were seen as a victory for the NAACP and appeared to open the door for blacks in Hollywood. The exchange between the NAACP and Hollywood also showed how the threat of boycotts still worked in the 1980s. The power of the increasing economic base, particularly in California, allowed for the NAACP to use boycotts as an effective tool in the black freedom struggle. Under Canson’s leadership, the NAACP kept pressure on the

⁷⁹³ One of the best works on stereotypes in film are: Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Film* (New York: Continuum, 2001) 4th Ed.

⁷⁹⁴ “NAACP Launches Film Bias Fight,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 27, 1982, A 5.

⁷⁹⁵ Curtis E. Rodgers, Esq. “NAACP vs. Hollywood, 2 Studios Sign Pact with NAACP, So You Want to be in the Movies,” *The Crisis* 90:1(January 1983): 7.

entertainment industry and some considered her to be the “Godmother” to the development of the Image Award activity.⁷⁹⁶

Canson continued to push for the recognition of blacks throughout the state. The state and nation’s legislation did not produce viable solutions to the educational problems facing minorities. The NAACP-WC continued to use legal attacks to rectify some of the issues, but Canson resorted to other more direct measures in addressing educational inadequacies. Under Canson’s leadership, she built educational programs that benefitted the Black community. In 1978, she approached the University of California, Berkeley about establishing an educational program centered on fulfilling the needs of African American students. After the *Bakke* decision universities were still admitting black students, but they failed to address the needs of the black students and their intellectual growth.⁷⁹⁷ Several universities started African American Studies programs in the 1970s, which expanded black focused studies for college but this did not address schools at the primary and secondary levels.

During the 1980s, the state’s Oral History Program completed hundreds of oral histories and the program’s mission was to record the stories of important political and public figures throughout the state. Canson understood the power of the oral histories and wanted to ensure that the voices of black leaders were also preserved. She approached the University of California, Berkeley about starting a NAACP Historical Documents Project at the UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library.⁷⁹⁸ Due to her early work at the Tuskegee library, Canson realized the importance of creating a repository of records from the NAACP that

⁷⁹⁶ Enduring Industry Pressure,” *Sacramento Observer*, April 16.2003, 10.

⁷⁹⁷ Virna Canson, , “Waging the War,” 33, NAACP-WC Collection.

⁷⁹⁸ Wyatt Buchanan, “Virna Canson -- NAACP leader for Western U.S.,” *San Francisco Gate*, April 18, 2003, http://articles.sfgate.com/2003-04-18/bay-area/17486850_1_virna-canson-naacp-african-american (Accessed April 12, 2011).

documented the events occurring on the West Coast. She wanted to donate materials to the Bancroft and create a collection based on the activities of the West Coast, NAACP. Under her guidance, the Historical Documents Advisory Board was formed and they looked at ways to preserve and promote the history of blacks in the West. The committee proposed a program that allowed for free access to the total community and suggested a “balanced qualitative program including manuscripts, documents and oral history.”⁷⁹⁹ The committee worked with the Bancroft Library to develop a historical preservation program that had the goal of preserving the history of blacks in the West. In 1977, Canson oversaw the donation of over 100,000 documents to the Bancroft. At a press conference, Executive Director, Roy Wilkins articulated her mission and stated, “by housing this collection ... in The Bancroft Library, we share some of the more perceptive accounts of how racism has operated in this region of the country and we share some of the history of how one organization has fought to stave off those forces of oppression.”⁸⁰⁰

For Canson, the project held several key purposes; she sought to have the civil rights activities in the states preserved, to highlight the achievements of the NAACP and to reach out to the surrounding community. When Canson donated the items to the Bancroft she required that the library start a mobile library program. This way materials and resources on black history could reach lower class neighborhoods. She believed that the community outreach component would help address some of the elements missing from education and provide a forum to discuss civil rights activities.⁸⁰¹ Canson suggested that the documents involve three different phases. The first phase involved the collection and donation of

⁷⁹⁹ Minutes of the Steering Committee for NAACP's Historical Documents Advisory Committee, May 3 1977, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, NAACP-WC Collection.

⁸⁰⁰ Roy Wilkins, Statement for the Press, 1977, Box 41, Folder 31, NAACP-WC Collection.

⁸⁰¹ Canson, Oral Interview, “Waging the War,” 32.

NAACP documents to the Bancroft Library. The second phase was aimed at preserving the voices of those individuals who participated in the black freedom struggle in California. She wanted black youths to conduct interviews with activists in order to create an oral history of the movement. The last phase of the document project incorporated a community outreach element that sought to educate teachers and students about blacks in the West. She envisioned a Black Mobile Museum of the West that carried tapes and manuscripts to area schools so young minority children people had access their history. Canson remarked, "The eye of the storm has shifted to the west," and she hoped the documents project would serve as a model for the other regional chapters to follow.⁸⁰²

For nearly ten years Canson oversaw the regular transfer of records to the Bancroft. When Canson retired from office the transfers of materials stopped. In part this occurred because the NAACP West Coast Region's headquarters were relocated from San Francisco to Los Angeles, but it became clear over time that the project's success was due to Canson's determination to create a repository of records. Her documents project proved to be an enormous success in preserving the activities of several notable leaders in the West. Her records have provided other scholars with insights that they have needed to craft their narratives. Moreover, her initiative to have oral histories done on black leaders greatly expanded our historical knowledge base.

Towards the end of Canson's career as Western Regional Director of the NAACP she noticed that the fight for civil rights had changed and needed to evolve in a different direction. The fight was not over but she wanted to hand the reigns over to a younger

⁸⁰² "A Permanent Home For Historic NAACP Records," *Sun Reporter*, December 8, 1977, 15.

person who understood the complexities of race in California. In 1988, Canson stepped down from her executive director position of the Western Regional Director of the NAACP. A young Jim Martin who was a former telephone company executive for Pacific Bell replaced her. After a 20-year career in Pacific Bell, Jim Martin was only 36 years old and had where his responsibilities covered a wide array of issues management, corporate public policy, and public affairs. He brought years of experience as a corporate manager and community advocate to the position. Martin was a part of the historic agreement between Pacific Bell and the NAACP in 1984. Pacific Bell loaned Martin to the NAACP for a year and he worked as the director of communications and development for the organization. He served as president, executive director of community involvement teams in the black telecommunications sector.⁸⁰³ He also had extensive experience within the NAACP and served as a manager of community relations in San Francisco. When Jim took over there was a shift to the next generation of civil rights leadership. However, he recognized Canson's accomplishments over the years in the black freedom struggle in California. He remarked, "Virna Canson and I have worked closely together for many years. She has spent most of her life in the civil rights struggle. It was the efforts of Canson and others in the struggle that gave me the opportunity to have spent over half of my life in the private sector. Her historical perspective will continue to be invaluable to me."⁸⁰⁴

As Douglas Flammig suggests in his own story, "this story sheds light on the continuing dilemmas about race and freedom in America."⁸⁰⁵ Canson's activism in California is important and sheds new light on activities in second tier cities. The civil

⁸⁰³ "West Coast Gets New NAACP Head," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, August 4, 1988, A 11.

⁸⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁵ Flammig, *Bound for Freedom*, 1.

rights narrative has expanded and now includes more voices, but the activities of women like Canson remain concealed as scholars continue to look at particular moments in the narrative rather than linking these moments together into a more fluid narrative of activism. Her story also reveals the real, day-to-day concerns individuals were concerned with. When civil rights legislation passed people held their breath and waited in anticipation of racial conditions changing. However, the black community was acutely aware that society was still controlled by white power structures and knew that white resistance would continue. As a civil rights leader, Canson advocated for civil rights from the 1940s until her death in 2003. When she later reflected on her career in an interview in 1995, she believed that individuals had to unite together in order to achieve civil rights, she stated, "I think the key to the future of civil rights in America is for all the protected classes -- women, minorities and seniors -- those who have benefitted from affirmative action, to form a big pool and pull together to preserve what we have achieved."⁸⁰⁶

⁸⁰⁶ Tracey Ross, "Sacramento's Virna Canson: Times are Just as Tough Now," *Sacramento Observer*, June 28, 1995, www.highbeam.com, (Accessed February 12, 2010).

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