

I'm Supposed to be Free:

Edna Johnson and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Indiana

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“I had crossed de line of which I had so long been dreaming.”<sup>1</sup> Harriet Tubman said of her deliverance from slavery in 1849, “I was free; but dere was no one to welcome me in de land of freedom, I was a stranger in a strange land...”<sup>1</sup> Although Tubman lived to see her black brothers and sisters freed from their perilous circumstances, almost a hundred years later the descendants of those delivered felt just as Tubman had in 1849. For one black woman in Indianapolis, Indiana, these feelings of rejection by the white community were particularly pronounced. One afternoon in her youth, Edna Johnson and some friends decided to go to a local eatery after a long day of activities. Facing the sneering of the white crowd, whispering “niggers” amongst themselves as they entered the public establishment, Johnson and her friends chose a table that was not separated from the white customers. After looking over the menu, trying to ignore the buzz of whispering encircling them, the group ordered their food. When their order was ready, the waitress grudgingly walked toward Johnson and her friends, plates in hand. Upon reaching the table, the waitress sneered at the group, looked straight at them, and spat in their food.<sup>2</sup> Years later, Johnson recalled that this was the price blacks paid for trying to “break down discrimination fronts.”<sup>3</sup>

Such scenes were common throughout the African American community, but not all blacks challenged the stipulations that were placed on their race as Johnson had. What makes this incident even more significant is Johnson’s involvement as a woman. Historians have not adequately studied black women’s contribution to the Civil Rights Movement. Aside from the few who have recently been commemorated, like Rosa Parks and Diane Nash, black women in the Freedom Movement remain historical enigmas. Despite the meager acknowledgments of

<sup>1</sup> Sarah H. Bradford, *Harriet: The Moses of her People* (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2010), 14.

<sup>2</sup> Edna Johnson, Interview by Greg Stone, 10 October, 1983, Bloomington, Indiana, Indiana University Center for the Study of History and Memory #83-42, transcript, 47.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 46.

these women, there is much more to their endeavors that cannot be summed up in one word like “organizer” or “administrator.” African American women in the Civil Rights Movement have been swallowed up by a larger narrative, reducing them to fading memories. Indiana is a prime example of the omission of black women within the movement. In several areas these women participated in the struggle for equality, though many of them did not do so in quite the same way as Johnson. From that day in her youth, Edna Johnson was destined to become one of the most influential black women during the Civil Rights Movement in Indiana, yet no one knows anything about her family, her accomplishments, her struggles, let alone her name. Edna Johnson spent her life committed to a cause, a fight for equality in every aspect of society. Beginning her civil rights work in a local branch of the United Auto Workers (UAW) Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO), Johnson fought for equality in the workplace. From there, she became more active in the Indianapolis community and confronted many issues that were prevalent at the time. Edna Johnson’s life tells a different story about the limits and possibilities of a blue collar woman growing up in a segregated Indianapolis. This story is an exception among black Hoosiers during the Civil Rights Movement. Instead of passively protesting discriminatory policies, Johnson actively participated in civil rights work using methods that were not consistent with her race and gender in the context of Indiana. Using the UAW as a stepping stone to engage in more active involvement fighting discriminatory issues, Johnson committed herself to the fight for equality. Thus, Johnson’s life offers a more complete, complicated, and convincing portrait of the Civil Rights Movement in Indiana, causing historians to rethink the movement within the state in terms of race, class, gender, and methods of protest.

Edna Johnson was born on March 1, 1918 to her parents Cato and Lillian Stephens, joining two other siblings. Her father was a molder at Link Belt Chain Company, one of the

largest foundry industries in Indianapolis. Her mother worked as a domestic helper but passed away when her daughter was a young girl of twelve.<sup>4</sup> It was not uncommon for women of color to work outside the home for white families. For many blacks it was a necessary sacrifice they had to make in order to survive. Most African Americans of Lillian and Cato's generation did not have the luxury of receiving a formal education, especially coming from a humble southern background.<sup>5</sup> Both of Johnson's parents were from Albany, Georgia, making their way to Indianapolis between 1915 and 1916. Following the young couple was Charles Malone, Lillian's father, and with him he brought his family, including his mother and grandchild. Both the Stephens and Malones settled on Laurel Street, part of a segregated neighborhood on the southeast side of Indianapolis.<sup>6</sup>

Beginning around 1900, thousands of African Americans fled the oppressive South looking "to try to better themselves" as Johnson believed her parents were.<sup>7</sup> Examining the demographic composition of Laurel Street alone demonstrates the massive influx in the African American population in Indiana. Nearly all of the street's residents hailed from a variety of southern states.<sup>8</sup> Thus the Stephens and Malone families' exodus from the South fits into the narrative of the Great Migration. For many blacks in Indiana, bettering themselves involved the acquisition of factory jobs, especially in Gary, Chicago, and Indianapolis. However, historian Emma Lou Thornbrough asserts that "the experience of new arrivals in Indianapolis was

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>5</sup> Emma Lou Thornbrough and Lana Ruegamer, *Indiana Blacks in the Twentieth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 37.

<sup>6</sup> Ancestry.com, United States of America, Bureau of the Census, Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1920; Ancestry.com, United States of America, Bureau of the Census, Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930, Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1930; Ancestry.com, U.S., World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918, Indiana, Marion County; Ancestry.com, Indianapolis, Indiana, City Directory, 1917: 1193. Although the exact date of the Stephens' arrival to Indianapolis is not abundantly clear, based on the dates provided in these documents, it may be surmised that the family arrived in Indianapolis between the years 1915 and 1916.

<sup>7</sup> Edna Johnson, Interview, 22.

<sup>8</sup> Fourteenth Census of the United States.

different from that of those in the frontier-like towns of the Calumet area.” In Indianapolis the black population was more developed than its neighboring towns and cities. Those blacks who were already living in the city were not always receptive to newcomers.<sup>9</sup> It was because of the influx of African Americans that Indianapolis began zoning off sections for the new arrivals to live, essentially creating a ghetto.<sup>10</sup> Such a policy by the city officials, as Johnson’s family was settling into their new home, foreshadowed the quest this young girl would eventually undertake when these policies became too horrendous for her people to bear.

Johnson’s second place of residence was in West Indianapolis where her community was not segregated. Living among white neighbors, who were predominantly Slovenian, Johnson was not “even conscious of segregation and discrimination until [they] moved.”<sup>11</sup> At age twelve, after Johnson’s mother passed, the Stephens family relocated from their mixed neighborhood to Haughville in Indianapolis.<sup>12</sup> Financial difficulty was not a foreign phenomenon for the young Edna. Once Lillian died, the family was forced to take on two boarders, trying to compensate for her lost income.<sup>13</sup> With the onslaught of the Great Depression, Cato lost his job at Link Belt and the family was forced to make many sacrifices. Unfortunately the price was often the education of Johnson and her siblings.<sup>14</sup> Years later, Johnson recalled how she was constantly hungry during that time, but she never complained.<sup>15</sup> She demonstrated her courage at a young age. This virtue would eventually become more pronounced and compel Johnson to act.

After attending four integrated grade schools, Johnson was placed at Crispus Attucks High School. Having grown up in an integrated neighborhood and attending integrated primary

<sup>9</sup> Thronbrough, *Indiana Blacks*, 36.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Pierce, *Polite Protest: The Political Economy of Race in Indianapolis, 1920-1970* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 56-57.

<sup>11</sup> Edna Johnson, Interview, 13.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>13</sup> Fifteenth Census of the United States.

<sup>14</sup> Edna Johnson, Interview, 15.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 46-47.

schools, Crispus Attucks was quite a shock for Johnson. Opened in 1927, Crispus Attucks was the first segregated high school in Indianapolis. It reflected the white community's fear because of the massive influx in the African American population. With its inferior facilities, curriculum, and teaching tools, Crispus Attucks put black students at a disadvantage compared to whites.<sup>16</sup> Years later, Johnson recalled her experience there: "I entered Attucks high at 12 years of age, but was denied the opportunity for a college education because my father had been denied equal opportunity in the vocational field. At that time I resolved to dedicate myself to the cause of equal opportunity and human dignity."<sup>17</sup> Richard Pierce, a Midwestern historian, notes that Crispus Attucks was "the most visible form of segregation in the city..."<sup>18</sup> It was at this school that Johnson was openly confronted with the evil face of discrimination, and it did not sit well with her. It was at Attucks that she met her husband William Henry Johnson; soon after graduating in 1934, the young couple was married. In 1938, the newlyweds were both hired by National Malleable Steel Castings Company in Indianapolis.<sup>19</sup> It was at this company that Edna Johnson finally found her voice, beginning her work in the Freedom Movement.

Despite her dramatic contribution to the Indiana Civil Rights Movement, Johnson, thus far, has been given no place within this complicated narrative. Until recently, historians of the Freedom Movement have focused predominantly on men, especially those who participated in civil rights organizations like the NAACP. Johnson's life is evidence that this narrow view is a grave oversight. By examining Johnson as an activist within Indianapolis, a more complete and accurate picture of the struggle for civil rights is obtained. While several historians of the North and South have sought to rectify this situation by focusing on black females during the Freedom

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<sup>16</sup> Pierce, *Polite Protest*, 30-31.

<sup>17</sup> *Indianapolis Recorder*, May 3, 1958.

<sup>18</sup> Pierce, *Polite Protest*, 12.

<sup>19</sup> Edna Johnson, Interview, 3.

Movement, Indiana historians are still guilty of the omission of African American women during the Civil Rights era. One exception is Darlene Clark Hine's book *When the Truth is Told: A History of Black Women's Culture and Community in Indiana 1875-1950*. Hine argues that black Hoosier women, through their involvement in the church and various women's clubs, "concentrated on 'racial advancement' and 'self-improvement' as short term strategies which would ultimately pave the way for the complete integration of blacks and the liberation of black women within American Society."<sup>20</sup> Other historians, although they do not focus on black women specifically, do provide a thorough, comprehensive analysis of African Americans in Indiana during the Freedom Movement. Most notable among them is Thornbrough who argues in *Indiana Blacks in the Twentieth Century* that the end of World War II marked a turning point as the Civil Rights Movement in Indiana intensified. The war brought neither complete oppression nor complete liberation for the black community, but a mixture of both.<sup>21</sup> While Thornbrough's book covers a broad scope by examining black Hoosiers from 1900-1970, her article, "Breaking Racial Barriers to Public Accommodations in Indiana, 1935-1963," takes a more narrow focus by studying segregated public facilities. In her article, Thornbrough argues that that it was the efforts of blacks, whites, and numerous civil rights organizations that sought to end segregation within Indiana.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, Pierce, in *Polite Protest: The Political Economy of Race in Indianapolis, 1920-1970*, claims that Indiana was an exception among northern and southern states during the Civil Rights Movement. With this in mind, Pierce argues that although blacks were oppressed by strict Jim Crow legislation, prevalent throughout southern cities, they "were unable to maintain the

<sup>20</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, *When the Truth is Told: A History of Black Women's Culture and Community In Indiana, 1875-1950* (Indianapolis: National Council of Negro Women Indianapolis Section, 1981), 83.

<sup>21</sup> Thornbrough, *Indiana Blacks*, 2-3.

<sup>22</sup> Emma Lou Thronbrough, "Breaking Racial Barriers to Public Accommodations," *Indiana Magazine of History* 83, no. 4 (December 1987): 311.

posture of a civil, patriotic, and hard-working population deserving of full civil rights while not risking their many accomplishments by engaging in loud public disturbances. Such an approach allowed white leaders to grow a city without fear of massive civil unrest,” and it failed to bring any significant change to the status of blacks within the Indianapolis community.<sup>23</sup> Historian James Madison constructs an argument that is similar to Pierce’s in his book *The Indiana Way: A State History*. Madison argues that Hoosiers have always been moderate throughout Indiana history, causing “change [to be] more evolutionary rather than revolutionary.”<sup>24</sup> Pierce, Thornbrough, and Madison provide a comprehensive overview of the central issues surrounding this time period such as school segregation and housing discrimination. Another historian, Peggy Seigel, adds to previous historians’ scholarship in “Pushing the Color Line: Race and Employment in Fort Wayne, Indiana, 1933-1963.” This piece closely examines the issue of discrimination in different employment practices, especially in blue collar work.<sup>25</sup> Although black women were working in the Civil Rights Movement in Indiana, Thornbrough, Pierce, Madison, and Seigel underemphasize the pivotal role these women played in the struggle for equality.

While looking at Indiana history is essential for understanding Johnson’s life, it is also important to look beyond the Midwest to gain perspective on the issues surrounding the national context which had a role in shaping Edna Johnson’s experiences. Historian James Patterson, in his book *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* argues that the end of World War II shifted the ways in which Americans perceived their society. Americans acquired “grand expectations” for the future, and these expectations had a role in shaping the events that occurred

<sup>23</sup>Pierce, *Polite Protest*; 8.

<sup>24</sup>James H. Madison, *The Indiana Way: A State History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 168.

<sup>25</sup>Peggy Seigel, “Pushing the Color Line: Race and Employment in Fort Wayne, Indiana, 1933-1963,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 104 (September 2008): 268-272.

throughout the U.S during the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>26</sup> Patterson emphasizes the role black women played in this postwar society and also sees them as possessing these “grand expectations” that were exclusively their own. Whereas Patterson’s work is more concerned with the Civil Rights Movement in the southern context, historian Thomas Sugrue highlights the struggle for freedom in the North in his book *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North*. Sugrue argues that “northern and southern activists influenced one another...[and] northern activists shared their experiences with their southern counterparts.”<sup>27</sup> Contrary to popular belief, Sugrue demonstrates how blacks throughout the North confronted the same discriminatory policies that plagued southern blacks. This picture is consistent with Indiana. Sugrue, however, does not take a particular interest in black women in this context. Thus, this paper bridges this gap by emphasizing the different roles of black Hoosier women during the movement and how Johnson fits into this narrative.

Finally, it is necessary to place Edna Johnson and black Hoosier women in a larger context. This task can only be achieved by studying national female activists in order to understand the gendered dynamics in Indiana. Belinda Robnett has written extensively on the national involvement of African American women in the Freedom Movement. In her book *How Long? How Long? African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights*, Robnett argues that black women were the driving force behind the Civil Rights Movement by primarily recruiting and mobilizing individuals within black communities. These experiences, she argues, empowered black women, for they did not feel oppressed by their male leaders.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, in

<sup>26</sup> James T. Patterson, preface to *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), vii.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Sugrue, preface to *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2009), xviii.

<sup>28</sup> Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4-5.

her article “African-American Women in the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965: Gender, Leadership and Micromobilization,” Robnett also highlights the distinct role African American women played, arguing that they were an “intermediate layer of leadership” essential for the movement’s success.<sup>29</sup> This argument is especially important to Johnson’s life, because it opens the door to a more thorough understanding of black women nationally. This understanding leads to a more in-depth examination of Johnson’s role as an activist within the Indianapolis community and how her activities related to the national context.

Other historians, like Barbara Ransbury, have taken an individualistic approach to history by examining a single black female activist in the Civil Rights Movement. Ransbury in her book, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision*, argues that Baker represents many African American women throughout the Civil Rights Movement who played crucial roles in the struggle for equality. Like many women, Baker was treated as an “outsider within” and although she defied the broad gendered categories that many tried to place her in, she was forced into the shadows of the patriarchs who ironically dominated the struggle for equality.<sup>30</sup> Historian LaVerne Gyant, on the other hand, does not see the presence of patriarchal oppression within the Civil Rights Movement. In her article “Passing the Torch: African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement,” Gyant holds that men and women were “partners in the ‘struggle for survival.’”<sup>31</sup> Because of these competing interpretations of gender relations in the Civil Rights Movement, this paper analyzes the evidence surrounding Johnson’s experiences in order to determine whether tenuous male and female relations affected her work.

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<sup>29</sup> Belinda Robnett, “African-American Women in the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965: Gender, Leadership and Micromobilization,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 101, no. 6 (May 1996): 1661.

<sup>30</sup> Barbara Ransbury, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 370.

<sup>31</sup> LaVerne Gyant, “Passing the Torch: African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of Black Studies* 26, no. 5 (May 1996): 644.

Understanding the national context that caused black women to dedicate themselves to advancing civil rights is also crucial to comprehending Johnson's involvement within the movement on the local level in Indiana. During World War II, the demographics of the United States changed. Around a million blacks moved from the South to northern cities to fill vacancies in industrial jobs because of heightened wartime production.<sup>32</sup> This production took place predominantly in the Midwest and Northeastern parts of the United States where forty-seven percent of the black population came to reside.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, the African American community grew in numbers, making up ten percent of the nation's population at the end of the war.<sup>34</sup> Thus, post-World War II ushered in a new era for blacks nationally. Because of their participation in the wartime economy, as well as their active duty in the military, blacks became painfully aware of the contradictions inherent in the United States' system of governance. Blacks acknowledged that the same nation fighting against tyranny and the preservation of democracy was simultaneously subjecting a race that was undeserving of the burden they had inherited from their forefathers.<sup>35</sup> "Following the end of World War II [black Americans] developed ever-greater expectations about the capacity of the United States to create a...happier society at home...high expectations [therefore]...aroused unprecedented rights consciousness on the home front."<sup>36</sup> It was in this context, after their participation in the war, that blacks began working towards equality for *all* Americans. Black women were included in this fight for equality, especially in the South where there was great fear of brutal violence against black men who

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<sup>32</sup> Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 19.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 380.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., vii.

openly confronted white males. Many white men viewed this confrontation as a challenge to their masculinity as a member of the superior race.<sup>37</sup>

Because so little has been written about black women in Indiana, it is essential to provide some context in order to understand how Johnson fits into this story. Thornbrough, one of Indiana's most respected historians, has made a significant contribution to Indiana's black history with her comprehensive study from 1900 through the 1970s. By focusing on African Americans, mainly within Indianapolis, Johnson's place of origin, Thornbrough attempts to see blacks in a new light, namely as a group separate from broad categorizations like "northern blacks," southern blacks," or even "Midwestern blacks." This distinction is relevant to Johnson's work in the movement, for she spent her entire life as an African American Hoosier. The Great Migration of 1900s led thousands of blacks, just like the Stephens family, to Indiana in search of better opportunities, but their hopes were never fulfilled. As more blacks began to flood the state, racial discrimination increased.<sup>38</sup> The Ku Klux Klan gained prominence in the 1920s throughout the state, stretching its influence from society to politics. The ascendency of the Klan led to further discrimination against African Americans in every aspect of society: school segregation, housing discrimination, and unequal access in public accommodations.<sup>39</sup>

During World War II, blacks in Indiana, as in many other states, gained more autonomy, especially in the workplace. With the war's end, however, African Americans returned to their inferior status and discrimination against them began to escalate once again. The *Indianapolis Recorder* reported the grave circumstances blacks were facing after the Second World War. Three large Indianapolis factories refused to hire African Americans once production subsided,

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 401.

<sup>38</sup> Thornbrough, *Indiana Blacks*, 44.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 50.

and many more blacks were facing heightened discrimination in the workplace.<sup>40</sup> Although the government passed legislation that appeared to protect the rights of African Americans throughout the state, the reality of the situation was much different. Most of the laws passed by the Indiana legislature, such as the Indiana Civil Rights Act of 1885, intended to guarantee rights for blacks, were simply ignored by individuals and even by the government itself.<sup>41</sup>

The struggle for civil rights in Indiana did not play out as it did in many other parts of the country. Although blacks in northern states did face the same discriminatory policies as their southern counterparts, violence against African Americans in Indiana was rare.<sup>42</sup> Pierce has attributed this rarity to the methods of protest used by blacks throughout the state. In Indiana, African Americans seemed to be passive in their protest against discriminatory practices used by the state and public facilities. Unlike many in the North and South, Indiana blacks appeared inactive in their quest for liberation. They did not openly or aggressively demand equality; instead they kept the peace by participating in negotiations with the government in the hopes that their good behavior would be rewarded. This non-confrontational, civil protest was a different type of strategy.<sup>43</sup> The majority of black Hoosier women also adopted the policy of passive resistance held by their patriarchs. These women did most of their civil rights work behind the doors of churches and in the homes of women who hosted several black women's organizations.<sup>44</sup> The main effort, spearheaded by the NAACP, was lobbying government. After 1965 they were joined in this effort by the Urban League.<sup>45</sup> Regardless of these organizations, "African Americans in Indiana had little recourse for addressing civil rights violations. Analysis

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<sup>40</sup> *Indianapolis Recorder*, January 21, 1950.

<sup>41</sup> Thornbrough, "Breaking Racial Barriers," 303.

<sup>42</sup> Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, xviii-xix.

<sup>43</sup> Pierce, *Polite Protest*, 124-125.

<sup>44</sup> Hine, *When the Truth is Told*, 5-7.

<sup>45</sup> Pierce, *Polite Protest*, 91.

of state NAACP records...shows the organization's relative lack of action," especially early on in the movement.<sup>46</sup> This lack of activity is one of the factors that spurred Johnson into action fighting for civil rights through the UAW.

While civil rights organizations were an important component in seeking to elevate blacks throughout society, so too was organized labor. American labor history has always been dynamic in nature. During the 1920s organized labor was unsuccessful. With the onslaught of the Red Scare in 1919 and a wave of strikes, people were left with "the uneasy impression that unions practiced subversion, an idea that the enemies of the unions promoted." Many employers saw unions as threatening to their authority, and so they sought to suppress them. In 1920 union membership was roughly five million strong, however, in 1929 membership plummeted drastically to three and a half million.<sup>47</sup> The turning point came in the 1930s, which was one of the most successful periods for unions. The passage of the Wagner Act in 1935 was perhaps the most defining event in labor history. This law was a product of New Deal legislation during the Great Depression and it permitted the organization of unions and ensured collective bargaining rights of workers.<sup>48</sup>

During this period, Indiana was one of the leading industrial states in the nation, producing primarily manufactured goods.<sup>49</sup> Manufacturing industries were marked with the greatest amount of activity by unions. Because of this activity, the UAW and CIO became interested in the cause of employees; thus the two organizations merged and collectively pushed for the rights of workers. In Indiana, the mid 1930s were marked by waves of sit-down strikes

<sup>46</sup> Krista Kinslow, "The Road to Freedom is Long and Winding: Jewish Involvement in the Civil Rights Movement in Indiana," *Indiana Magazine of History* 108 (March 2012): 11.

<sup>47</sup> George Brown Tindall and David Emory Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 2007), 2:1007.

<sup>48</sup> Madison, *The Indiana Way*, 285.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 274.

against the industrial order, which reflects the golden age for labor history occurring throughout the rest of the nation. Madison, however, sees Hoosiers during this era as moderate in their push for organized labor. This view is similar to his interpretation of the Civil Rights Movement within the state.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, with the end of World War II, the era of the unions' prosperity began to subside. The need for mass production decreased and many blue collar workers lost their jobs. As union membership was declining, white collar jobs began to drastically increase as the American economy acquired more service oriented positions.<sup>51</sup> On top of this, the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947 was a major blow to organized labor. This act did away with the advances made by the Wagner Act, prohibiting closed shop negotiations, and allowing states to pass "right to work laws."<sup>52</sup> Thus "Taft-Hartley revealed that the political power of organized labor was waning," and with its ratification, the heyday of the unions was over.<sup>53</sup>

Upon her appointment at National Malleable Steel Castings Company, Edna Johnson was looking for an opportunity to better herself. Johnson grew up in a segregated Indianapolis at a time when her race was unjustifiably suppressed. Describing her work environment Johnson noted how "the bathroom was segregated...the lunchroom was segregated...[and] no whites or blacks worked together at all."<sup>53</sup> Despite the misconceptions of Jim Crowism's exclusivity to the Deep South, discrimination was running rampant throughout Indianapolis businesses.<sup>54</sup> Because of these unfair practices, Johnson decided to aid in organizing a National Labor Relations Board election at National Malleable after the passage of the Wagner Act. The hostility of Johnson's work environment was such that when she participated in this electoral feat, many of her black

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 285-286.

<sup>51</sup> Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 42-46.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 50-51.

<sup>53</sup> Edna Johnson, Interview, 7.

<sup>54</sup> Seigel, "Pushing the Color Line," 246.

coworkers were too afraid to associate with her.<sup>55</sup> This reluctance was not altogether unwarranted. On the day that voting was to take place, Johnson was fired by National Malleable for wearing a button showing her support for organized labor. Luckily, a local union chapter, UAW CIO 761, was voted in and Johnson was reinstated to her former position. Early on in her activism, Johnson was already an exception among black Hoosiers as written by historians Pierce and Madison. Johnson realized that non-confrontational, civil tactics were less effective than active, bold strategies. Unlike many Indiana blacks, she was more concerned with affecting change than alienating the white power structure. In order to bring about this change, Johnson embraced organized labor. Among the different labor unions available, most blacks preferred the UAW to represent them, for it was one of “the most racially equalitarian of the CIO unions.”<sup>56</sup> This permissive dynamic of the UAW worked in Johnson’s favor; she took center stage and was at the forefront of the union negotiations with National Malleable.<sup>57</sup>

Women made up ten percent of the employees within National Malleable. The company employed one thousand workers, only one hundred of which were women. The racial divide among the employees came down to about fifty percent white and fifty percent black. Thus, roughly speaking, Johnson was one of fifty black women throughout the plant.<sup>58</sup>

The demographics of National Malleable are quite telling; they provide historical insight into an issue that many national female activists struggled with during the Freedom Movement. Being quite a small minority within National Malleable, Johnson’s decision to run for union

<sup>55</sup> Edna Johnson, Interview, 9.

<sup>56</sup> August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, preface to *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), viii.

<sup>57</sup> Edna Johnson, Interview, 8.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 9. It is quite possible that National Malleable employed less than fifty black women. Even though the racial divide between blacks and whites was split in half, it does not immediately follow that this racial divide was identical when it came to female employees. However, based on the data provided by Johnson, it is impossible to know the exact number of African American female workers. At most there were fifty black females within the plant, though it is likely that the number was much smaller.

office was certainly a bold endeavor. Working her way up from treasurer, Edna Johnson was finally elected president of the local UAW CIO 761 in 1943, the same year as the Detroit Race Riots.<sup>59</sup> Although this election was certainly an accomplishment, most African American women within the movement were not so fortunate. Black women in the Freedom Movement were typically subjugated by their male counterparts. Prohibited from speaking their minds openly, these women were more or less powerless and occupied only untitled “intermediate” positions.<sup>60</sup>

This picture of black female activists is not consistent with the life of Edna Johnson. Johnson was elected president of a union. In fact, she was the first black female president of a local union chapter throughout the entire nation.<sup>61</sup> Johnson’s position was titled, but she was not powerless. Furthermore, during her time within the UAW, Johnson did not feel confined to a certain manner of decorum, nor was she discriminated against by black men because she was a woman, attributing this irregularity to the dominance of the KKK. Although the local UAW was composed of both white and black members, many white workers were disconcerted by the success Johnson was having in pushing for black’s advancement.<sup>62</sup> These uneasy feelings, held by the white employees, caught the eye of the KKK. Pitting white workers against black, Johnson believed that the KKK was working behind the scenes attempting to disrupt the company’s union. Although white and black workers were aware of this infiltration, many were not privy to the details and had no knowledge of the methods used by the KKK. Even Johnson, as president of the local union, was unaware of the specific techniques the group employed. This marginalization within the UAW caused blacks, both male and female, to unite and push even

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>60</sup> Robnett, “African American Women,” 1661; Ransburg, *Ella Baker*, 143.

<sup>61</sup> Edna Johnson, Interview, 10.

<sup>62</sup> *Indianapolis Recorder*, February 22, 1947.

harder for equal treatment.<sup>63</sup> Thus, in this unique environment, there was no room for gender discrimination.

Referring to the union as “the salvation of [her] people,” Johnson actively and aggressively pushed for change despite the hurdles she encountered. Among the demands that Johnson made during her time as president were equal pay for equal work and maternity leave for black women.<sup>64</sup> Having these demands met was usually an ordeal. National Malleable strongly resisted the objectives of the UAW on many occasions. As president of the local chapter, Johnson was expected to fulfill her job requirements as union president while retaining her position as a grinder within the plant. Johnson’s plant supervisor offered her a tempting office job on several occasions, trying to persuade her to leave the UAW. When misrepresenting their intentions did not work, Johnson’s industrial supervisors had her followed and tried to catch her in compromising situations so they could fire her. Despite these scare tactics, Johnson would not back down. She openly confronted and challenged her employers, for she believed that there was “no room to treat [her] any different than anyone else.”<sup>65</sup>

When the demands of the UAW were not met, Johnson employed blue collar methods and was instrumental in staging a strike against National Malleable. While President Truman was busy drafting an executive order to end segregation in the Armed Forces, Johnson and nearly one thousand other employees walked the picket line on June 25, 1948 after union negotiations with National Malleable broke down. Employees who were seeking a thirteen cent per hour raise refused to continue their work when National Malleable made its final offer: to increase workers’

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<sup>63</sup> Edna Johnson, Interview, 38. Although the KKK’s influence diminished in the mid-1920s, its presence was still felt in the 1940s and 50s, though most of the Klan’s work took place underground. While infiltration of National Malleable was certainly possible, verification of this infiltration is unattainable. Johnson believed that the KKK was working secretly behind the scenes to disrupt order, so newspaper publications of this event are unavailable.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 37.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 12.

hourly pay by a mere six cents. On top of this, the company refused to continue providing work gloves for employees. Many workers, especially those in heavy labor intensive positions, went through two pairs of gloves each work day. Each pair of gloves cost nearly a dollar. A large majority of the workers who participated in the strike were African Americans. Many white employees within National Malleable held jobs that were more skilled in nature. In fact, the *Indianapolis Recorder* reported that only two or three blacks held positions within the skilled sector of the company. While this is not surprising given the educational opportunities available to blacks at this time, the chief issue Johnson and black union members wanted addressed was the unfair discrimination against them. Management was willing to increase the pay of skilled workers by eleven cents while the majority of black workers were only offered the six cents increase. National Malleable reacted to the strike by employing a “new Taft-Hartley weapon.” The company filed a lawsuit against the local UAW CIO 761 and its officers, demanding twenty thousand dollars a day for the duration of the strike. National Malleable claimed that the union failed to give the company a thirty day notice before going on strike, a violation of the Taft-Hartley Act.<sup>66</sup> Eventually these permissive policies of the Taft-Hartley Act, favoring employers over unions, would cause Edna Johnson to reevaluate the union as a pathway to change. Ultimately the blue collar methods employed by Johnson were successful. After the strike ended, black workers within the company received a fair increase in their wages. Years later Johnson recalled how “we [Johnson and the employees] walked the picket line...[and] we came out alright.”<sup>67</sup>

In *Polite Protest*, Pierce asserts that “African Americans in Indianapolis realized that large scale public demonstrations were out of character and potentially counterproductive...[and]

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<sup>66</sup> *Indianapolis Recorder*, July 3, 1948.

<sup>67</sup> Edna Johnson, Interview, 45.

they were unable to increase their fortune significantly.”<sup>68</sup> Edna Johnson broke the mold of this typical description of black Hoosiers. Working through the UAW Johnson boldly confronted discriminatory issues. She did not refrain from acting, like many other blacks did, hoping her good behavior would be rewarded; instead she was relentless in her approach. When her voice was not heard, Johnson did not submit to her oppressors; instead she took control and demanded equality. Although she was relatively successful at obtaining rights for black employees on several issues within National Malleable, like equal wages and equal treatment for blacks and whites, Johnson did agree with Pierce in one respect: there was a slow pace of change, but it only came from working exclusively within the union. With the enforcement of the Taft-Hartley Act, the UAW was no longer providing the means to alter discrimination. In 1952 Johnson resigned her presidential position. “That little rebel from Indiana,” as many came to call her, was looking for revolutionary change; one company was not enough, Edna Johnson wanted to shake an entire city.<sup>69</sup> This blue collar black woman was certainly not a typical Hoosier during the Freedom Movement.

Although working in the UAW did give Edna Johnson a voice, she wanted more. She wanted to make a greater difference throughout Indianapolis and found her opportunity in the real estate business. After becoming a licensed real estate broker, Johnson opened her own establishment, Edna Johnson Reality Co. It was through this business that Johnson really began to radically push for change in a way that would affect blacks throughout the city. Although Johnson’s shift from blue collar union work to the real estate business was quite drastic, it demonstrates her commitment to the cause. With her new job, Johnson entered the world of white collar individuals, but she was still fighting for common blacks. In Indianapolis, the

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<sup>68</sup> Pierce, *Polite Protest*, 124-125.

<sup>69</sup> Edna Johnson, Interview, 6.

housing crisis was one of the most tantalizing issues the African American community was facing. The city had three areas that were populated predominantly by blacks, the most infamous was Pat Ward's Bottom, located northwest of the central metropolis. This area was often simply referred to as the Bottom's because of its close proximity to the putrid smelling canals near Indiana Avenue.<sup>70</sup> Because of the rapidly increasing African American population during the Great Migration, the zoned out sections, where blacks were forced to reside, were soon overflowing. There simply was not enough room to house all the newcomers.

The dwellings that blacks did inhabit within the zones were inferior to white places of residence. Modern plumbing and electricity were lacking in numerous homes, and many black neighborhoods did not receive basic public services such as trash removal. Unsanitary conditions marked black neighborhoods, and these conditions often resulted in sickness. Furthermore, many black homes were overcrowded, often housing several extended family members.<sup>71</sup> Such was the case in the home of Charles Malone, Johnson's grandfather, where nine people resided, including four generations of the Malone family.<sup>72</sup> Seeking to ameliorate the situation, numerous blacks tried to purchase homes outside the three zones. Their actions, however, were met with great opposition, and "the underlying cause...was white prejudice."<sup>73</sup> In several white Indianapolis neighborhoods, homeowners were barred from selling their property to more affluent black families who could afford it. Those blacks who were successful at purchasing property in white neighborhoods often regretted it. High fences were constructed around their property and flyers were distributed throughout the community that read such things as "DO YOU WANT A

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<sup>70</sup> Pierce, *Polite Protest*, 11-12.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>72</sup> Fourteenth Census of the United States.

<sup>73</sup> Thornbrough, *Indiana Blacks*, 133.

NIGGER FOR A NEIGHBOR?"<sup>74</sup> In most cases, however, poverty was running rampant among colored families, and buying property was simply not a reality. Those who tried to rent outside segregated neighborhoods were also met with opposition. Often, when inquiring into vacancies within white apartment complexes or communities, the landlords and realtors would tell black families that the dwelling had just been occupied. When these excuses failed and landlords were forced to rent to African Americans because of the 1885 Civil Rights Act in Indiana, blacks were charged as much as twenty percent more than their white neighbors.<sup>75</sup>

Dire housing conditions for Indianapolis's African Americans pressed Edna Johnson into action. Johnson was one of only four black realtors in the whole city. As a result, she and her colleagues were not permitted to join the local realtors' association, the Indianapolis Real Estate Board. Instead, they created their own association in 1952, the Central Real Estate Board of which Johnson was later president. Members of the Indianapolis Real Estate Board believed that the sale of white homes to black families would depreciate property values, stating "We feel that the leading members of the colored race feel that the best interests of both races are served by segregation in real estate areas."<sup>76</sup> This policy barred African Americans from residency in nearly ninety percent of Indianapolis and the surrounding areas.<sup>77</sup> With "Democracy in Housing" as their slogan Johnson and the Central Real Estate Board sought to counter the policies of the Indianapolis Real Estate Board by lobbying Indiana politicians, urging them to step up, take responsibility, and to stop ignoring the housing crisis.<sup>78</sup>

During Johnson's time as an activist fighting against housing discrimination, she encountered a bill floating around in the Indiana legislature that set quotas for the percentage of

<sup>74</sup> Pierce, *Polite Protest*, 59.

<sup>75</sup> Thornbrough, *Indiana Blacks*, 133-135.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>78</sup> Edna Johnson, Interview, 49-52, 79.

property blacks were permitted to own throughout certain neighborhoods. Because of the unmistakable problems the black community was facing due to housing shortages and the civil rights fervor that was creeping across the nation during the 1950s, with the Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, politicians could no longer turn a blind eye to this issue. The bill was a halfhearted, insulting attempt to keep black occupation of white neighborhoods at a bare minimum. Only allowing roughly two black families to occupy each block, the bill was sure to continue segregation throughout the community for years to come. Feeling that the Indiana Civil Rights Commission (ICRC) was not doing enough to kill this unjust piece of legislation, Johnson stepped in.<sup>79</sup> Actively speaking out against the ICRC in opposition to the bill, Johnson was not amiable or docile in her methods of protest, an identifier that historians Madison and Pierce claim was characteristic of all black Hoosiers. Although Johnson was unsuccessful at singlehandedly killing the bill, a few years later the law was repealed, for “they [the legislature and the ICRC] found out what I [Johnson] told them was right.”<sup>80</sup>

Within the housing battle, Johnson was involved in more than just one issue surrounding this problem. During the early 1960s, the houses around Indiana Avenue, one of the areas populated predominantly by blacks, had become terribly desolate. This section of the city was one of Indianapolis’ worst slums and many city officials sought to do away with it, hoping they could use the land for redevelopment projects, one of which later came to be the construction of Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI). Government officials believed that these redevelopment projects would give the city tremendous value, while simultaneously

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 54.

transforming Indiana Avenue from a slum and incorporating it into the central metropolis.<sup>81</sup>

While these intentions seemed to be virtuous in nature, in reality, these projects would be yet another transgression against the African American community. “City and state officials planned to remove families...well aware that the existing housing market could not absorb the displaced families.”<sup>82</sup> Johnson saw the dangers of the city officials’ endeavors and would not stand for them. Conversing at length with Mayor Albert Losche, Johnson fought against the unjust actions against blacks that would surely follow if officials got their way.<sup>83</sup> Removing the black community from Indiana Avenue would cause the largest diaspora the city had ever seen. African Americans living in this area were left with two options: they could either sell their property willingly to the city, although the sums being offered were far from fair, or they could become victims of eminent domain.<sup>84</sup> Johnson was successful at persuading the mayor to consider the negative possibilities that dispersing the black community would have. Creating a Slum Study Committee in 1963, the same year as Martin Luther King Jr.’s March on Washington, Mayor Losche appointed Johnson as one of its chief representatives. She advocated the “rehabilitation of homes” instead of their removal.<sup>85</sup> Johnson was the only woman and the only black on the committee, an accomplishment in and of itself. Although the committee was unsuccessful at stopping the removal of the neighborhoods, Johnson’s involvement in this issue demonstrates her determination to have the voices of the black community heard.<sup>86</sup>

After years of commitment to a cause, equality for African Americans in Indianapolis, Johnson finally began to see the fruits of her labor. Having spent years lobbying the mayors of

<sup>81</sup> Pierce, *Polite Protest*, 78-79.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>83</sup> Edna Johnson, Interview, 53.

<sup>84</sup> Pierce, *Polite Protest*, 82.

<sup>85</sup> *Indianapolis Recorder*, April 12, 1968; *Indianapolis Recorder*, July 6, 1963.

<sup>86</sup> Edna Johnson, Interview, 53.

Indianapolis, Johnson was an instrumental individual in arranging a housing conference with Mayor John J. Barton in 1966. Among those who attended the conference were the deputy director of the ICRC, the general manager of the Madame C.J .Walker Company, attorneys, and board members of the NAACP. Amidst all these prodigious individuals in the Indianapolis community, Johnson was listed in the *Indianapolis Recorder* as “Mrs. Edna Johnson of the Edna Johnson Realty Co.” This meeting signaled Johnson’s arrival as a leading voice within the African American community in Indianapolis. It was through her business, used as a tool to counter discrimination, that Johnson found her calling. She was a representative of the black community because this community failed to adequately represent itself. During the conference, among attorneys, managers, and directors, this blue collar woman made a lasting impression. In a resolution drawn up during the conference, white politicians and blacks, both blue and white collar agreed that:

“every human person has a right to decent housing and a responsibility to work towards this goal for all persons in our community. Housing, both public and private should be available to everyone regardless of race, color, or creed. Each person, each family, has a right to live decently and with dignity in housing anywhere in the community. Housing discrimination on the basis of race, or color, or creed is immoral...”<sup>87</sup>

Against the backdrop of Indiana’s social and political climate where discrimination was running rampant, but active confrontation between blacks and whites was lacking, Johnson declared “I’m supposed to be free.”<sup>88</sup> These five words came to define Edna Johnson’s life. They encouraged her to take a stand by assiduously challenging the policies that were intended to confine her. These policies were a product of the white community’s prejudice and the conventional roles Johnson was expected to conform to as a blue collar black woman in Indianapolis, but conform she did not. The life of Edna Johnson underlines many aspects of the

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<sup>87</sup> *Indianapolis Recorder*, March 5, 1966.

<sup>88</sup> Edna Johnson, Interview, 60.

Indiana Civil Rights Movement, namely how race, class, gender and methods of protest interacted within the state. Thus, Johnson's life tells a different story about a blue collar black woman's fight against segregation in Indianapolis. Johnson was an exception among black Hoosiers. Her life offers a more complete picture of the Civil Rights Movement in Indiana, for it testifies to the fact that all Hoosiers did not react to the movement in the same way, a more convincing conclusion than what has been offered by previous historians. Openly protesting civil rights violations, Johnson was not civil in her quest for freedom. Unlike other black women during the movement, Johnson actively engaged in the fight for equality outside of churches and women's organizations, she openly confronted several issues that were suppressing her black brothers and sisters. It is Johnson's blue collar background, however, that makes her a truly extraordinary individual. Johnson embraced her humble upbringing while simultaneously refusing to let it define her. Using the UAW as a stepping stone, she gained prominence throughout the Indianapolis community and achieved more in thirty years than many white collar professionals of the NAACP and Urban League did in their entire lifetimes. After many years of bravery, defeat, perseverance, and suffering, Edna Johnson triumphed. She was finally free.

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