



Lifting as We Climb:
African American Women Organizers in Portland, Oregon, 1912-1957
Oregon Women's History Consortium Fellowship Report
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Introduction

African American women in Portland, Oregon, who were active participants in the black freedom struggle of the first half of the twentieth century walked a complex labyrinth of cultural expectations in their pursuit for racial justice.¹ As women, they were charged with responsibility as moral guardians and cultural caretakers while they pursued racial justice through appropriate women's work such as benevolence, public relations, clerical support, and community building.² Women in the West were seen as markers of civility. As "gentle tamers," it was their responsibility to act as moral stewards. Yet as African Americans, they had the added responsibility of demonstrating their community was beyond reproach in the face of fervent racist stereotyping and white supremacy. Many women leaders of this era followed the ethos of W.E.B. DuBois who charged the "Talented Tenth" with the responsibility to teach and uplift the lower classes of African Americans for the betterment of the race altogether. This essay seeks to demonstrate ways women walked these lines: gender, race and class, in the pursuit of racial justice. Ultimately, my work seeks to challenge traditional civil rights historiography of Oregon that highlights male leadership and in effect overshadows the role of women altogether.

In the American West, African American women played a unique role in building community and social capital within an isolating landscape—isolating because many communities were born anew through the migrant experience. Moreover, the West—and Oregon in particular—was isolating for racial minorities because the vision of the West as defined by the

white majority did not include them. Historian Quintard Taylor argues that, “The urbanites were the first black westerners who could be accurately called a community. It was through them that the contemporary black West began to take shape.”³ This was especially true for the African American community in Portland, where they relied upon institutions that fostered social capital among migrants separated from kinship networks elsewhere in the country. By forging churches, newspapers, and socio-economic organizations they enabled themselves to fight racial oppression collectively. Moreover, most of the labor required to sustain these institutions relied on women's work.

The necessary ingredients for reversing racial oppression included breaking down racial stereotypes and building up social capital. By building community, women leaders created a shared purpose among disparate migrant families. Community building included: creating a shared history and shared spaces where people could gather, establish artistic and cultural uniqueness, and sustain the community's longevity through education, business alliances, community beautification, and civic organizations. This essay divides the club women into two generations: the early generation, the group of women who laid the foundation for Portland's black community in the early twentieth century while they adhered to Progressive era expectations of true womanhood (1912-1925). the World War II generation, whose work was inspired and shaped by the clubwomen before them, yet who also transcended barriers of female leadership that impacted Progressive era women (1940-1957).

Historian Frances Jones-Sneed traveled to Oregon on a fellowship in 1995 to research the work of African American clubwomen in the State. She described her work as “lifting the veil of invisibility,” because much of the celebration of civil rights gains in Oregon focused on male leadership and overshadowed women's impact on the movement. It is my hope, as it was Sneed's

for her own, that my research will lift a veil upon the history of women's work in Oregon in general, as well as the untiring work of African American women specifically whose dedication to civil rights was pivotal to the survivance of the black community of Portland at large.⁴

Part One: Early Generation

Black Studies scholar Walidah Imarisha in her public program, “Why Aren’t There More Black People in Oregon,” argues that Oregon’s small black population is largely the result of early racial exclusion laws in Oregon that banned African Americans from migrating to the territory in an effort to create a white Eden.⁵ The white vision was a state where they could avoid minority labor competition and African American neighbors, thereby avoiding racial tensions that infected the eastern half of the United States. Because of exclusion laws, early Black migrants settled in other West Coast cities like Los Angeles and Seattle.⁶ Exclusion laws were adapted several times in the 1840s and 1850s and though they would become obsolete with the passage of the 14th and 15th Amendments, racial exclusion would manifest into de facto regulations that controlled black bodies and limited access to commerce, public accommodation, education, and real estate.

Imarisha also argues that the small black population that dug in, remained, and thrived stand as evidence to the community’s survivance.⁷ Oregon’s tradition of exclusion is significant to the history of African American women activists in the first half of the twentieth century because it reveals the hostile environment African Americans in Portland endured, and the type of everyday activism they expressed by remaining and thriving in a state whose policy makers were driven to exclude them.

As survivors of migration and exclusion, Oregon's black pioneers proved equipped to foster a strong community among black families from various parts of the country. There were three pillars of community building in early Black Portland: women's social clubs, newspapers and civic organizations. The first of these is exemplified by the Oregon Association of Colored Women's Clubs (OAWC). Formed in 1912 as the Colored Women's Council and also known as the Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, the OAWC was a conglomeration of several smaller civic and literary clubs established in Oregon at the turn the twentieth century.



The Officers of the Oregon Colored Women's Council, as printed in *The Advocate*, December 20th 1913. Courtesy of the Verdell A. Burdine and Otto G. Rutherford Family Collection, gift of the Rutherford Family, Special Collections, Portland State University Library and Black Studies Department, Portland State University.⁸

Black women's clubs are rooted in an array of American organizing cultures. One was white women's clubs that were benevolent centered programs which later shifted to the promotion of literacy and citizenship. Club meetings were places where women could better themselves intellectually and create a sense of shared purpose together as women. As historian Sandra Haarsager argues, "Clubs created a female space outside the home and church where none had existed before... Women who found their voices through study and club ritual soon found causes to talk about."⁹ During the Progressive Era, these clubs emphasized benevolence work, but also advocacy as women gained access to political spheres of influence.¹⁰

Black women's clubs were also rooted in Black men's benevolent associations that were forged by freed slaves to provide social safety nets for Black men and women who were excluded from mainstream services such as burial insurance, sickness and disability pay, and affordable loans. The clubs also provided networking opportunities among community members and new business leaders.¹¹

Perhaps the deepest root of black women's clubs is the legacy of the matrifocal character of black family kinship networks during enslavement. When the Atlantic slave trade was banned in 1808, smaller slaveholdings became powerhouses in the selling and buying of Black men and women. Because of their value as laborers, enslaved men were more likely to be separated from their families. This separation disrupted family stability and left families disproportionately matrifocal, therefore women took on leadership roles and the caring of extensive kinship networks.¹² Historian Shirley J. Carlson argues that these leadership roles led to the shaping of Black Victoria, or "Race women"—women who were a model for true womanhood among middle class and elite African Americans. Unlike their white counterparts, Black Victorias benefited from the acceptance of female leadership in their community. Carlson argues that the

Black Victoria both adhered to the mainstream American ideal of “cult of true-womanhood,” as well as to the ideals of female leadership, specific to the African American community.

Like quilting, Black Victorias pieced together various expectations of true womanhood along with their independent ideas of women’s roles in the fight for racial justice. As Historian Anne Meis Knupfer explains, “as moral guardians and caretakers of children, youths, and the elderly, they reenacted roles that were socially appropriate for women during the Progressive Era.”¹³ Race women were lauded for their ability to balance both civic leadership and the expectations of true womanhood. This is evidenced by the many elite women celebrated in the pages of black newspapers in Portland in the early twentieth century. In one case, Mrs. L.K. Weeks is praised for her role as matron of the Frazier Detention Home, as “the first woman of color to occupy such a position.” She was praised as well for her ability to “keep her home and its surrounding in beautiful condition, so that she is always prepared to extend the hand of hospitality without embarrassment.”¹⁴

These race women formed their own visions of community through the formation of several social and civic clubs. These clubs evolved out of the interests of the women involved, and varied their emphasis on benevolence and personal betterment activities. For example, when the clubs coalesced in 1912 as a state organization, they formed different departments “each of which is under the direction of a woman which is a specialist in that subject...Social, literature, suffrage, rescue work and juvenile court were the things most emphasized.” By 1914, the women had organized their own club house at 510 Clay Street. The Oregon club was organized under a regional branch as well as a national branch, the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs (NACWC) was based out of Washington DC, whose motto, handed down to the OAWC was “To Lift as We Climb.”¹⁵

The OAWC, like its national counterpart, was deeply inspired by the teachings of W.E.B. DuBois and his philosophy of the Talented Tenth. The Talented Tenth, DuBois held, was made up of America's most elite and gifted citizens of the black community, and it was these more privileged citizens, who were responsible to live virtuously by example for less privileged African Americans to uplift the socio-political standing of the entire community.

This strategy was embraced by the NACWC at its inception.¹⁶ In Oregon, OAWC also incorporated this philosophy by promoting the achievements of the most elite and successful of Portland's black community and through a variety of benevolent and charitable programs—all of which fell in line with women's work.¹⁷ As historian Knupfer argues, the Du Boisian "prescriptions of leadership" had designed the social clubs as distinguished by social class. This was clearly the case of the OAWC in its early years. In a 1914 article in the *Advocate*, Portland's Black newspaper, the Council and its members are highlighted. All portrayed were upper class women—many of whom belonged to the community's most prominent families such the Flowers, Bogles, Allens, Grays, and Plummers.¹⁸

Black women in Portland organized to uplift those most in need in their community as they knew very well that whites judged the very best of the community on actions of those most struggling. This impetus never left club women in the first half of the twentieth century. They were charged with the responsibility to "lift as they climbed," not just for the simple cause of supporting their own but also in full awareness that the white community would use the disparaging actions of any African American to justify segregation and exclusion.¹⁹ In this way, women were responsible for managing public relations for the community through their roles as mothers and women who over saw community beatification, moral stewardship, caretaking of juveniles, and organizing of cultural activities.

The focus on positive public relations was even more vital in Portland due to the community's small size and deep entrenched exclusionary practices. To the clubwomen, the "bettering of interracial relations" was the OAWC's most worthwhile cause. Per Black Studies scholar Dr. Darrell Millner, "'inter-racial relations' were a polite way to couch their fight for freedom in a non-aggressive and inclusive manner."²⁰ This strategy reflected a time when elite African Americans shared the common goal of combating racial stereotypes and segregation by fitting into national, and white ideals of good citizenship.

One significant way club women sought to fit into these ideals of citizenship was to promote their race as one with a shared black history and cultivated black arts and literature culture. Historian Sandra Haarsager explains that groups promoted their history, art and culture to mark their community as "legitimate, permanent, and at least mature, if not sophisticated."²¹ As cultural stewards and community archivists, women of the Black community in Portland were charged as the keepers of the community's history. After the founding of Negro History Week in 1925, club women combined the two pursuits of history, and arts together for their annual Negro History Week Tea and Art Exhibit.²² Clubwomen took full advantage of this yearly event and tied it to their foremost civic program: The Katherine Gray Scholarship Fund. At the end of the school year, the funds raised by the event were awarded to "one deserving female" who was accepted to an accredited college.

By emphasizing the community's artistic accomplishments, they were establishing a sense of shared community among a population of migrants, meanwhile validating their community in the face of antagonistic white mainstream population who threatened their citizenship and sense of belonging through legal and de facto segregation. The Negro History Week Tea and Art Exhibit demonstrates how club women combined walked many lines of

expectations—class, citizenship, and gendered expectations—to address the needs of their community.²³

Club work also served the purpose of creating spaces where folks could gather, socialize, and organize free from racial scrutiny. As historian Quintard Taylor points out, race organizations doubled as a “retreat, where blacks could lose their anonymity, and gain some control in their lives.”²⁴ Beyond race, women purposely carved out a space of their own to address the specific needs and moral duties of women in the early twentieth century. The extra significance this held in the West was recognized by the national branch: “These meetings are uniting the women of the West as nothing else can. The exchanging of ideas, hearing the reports of the work as being carried on by the different committees show the power of unity.”²⁵

In 1914, female and male political and religious leaders in Portland’s black community followed the course of many of their sister cities in the West and established a local branch of the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The early charter stated that its mission was “to promote equality of rights, to eradicate caste or race prejudice among the citizens of the city and the state. To advance the interest of Black citizens; to secure for them impartial suffrage; and to increase their opportunities for securing justice in the courts, equal education for children, employment according to their ability and complete equality before the law.”²⁶ Of the fifteen original members, five were women, and elected Vice President was a “figure of consequence,” and race woman, Beatrice Morrow Cannady. Cannady was a university graduate, musician, activist, and the first black female law graduate in Oregon.²⁷

Like the OAWC advocacy work, Cannady pursued “bettering interracial relations” as a prominent public speaker. Cannady lectured across Northern Oregon on black history, culture, and arts to white audiences at universities, churches, high schools, through broadcast on weekly

KGW radio programs, and as editor of the Black newspaper, *The Advocate*. In 1929, she explained that, “Some years ago it occurred to me that perhaps the white people who disliked me and my people did not know our true selves...I reasoned that if they knew that I was ambitious to be the best citizen that I was capable of being, that I wanted education [and] freedom, that I have the same hopes, feelings and aspirations they had, they would not dislike me any longer.” Per Cannady, promoting “interpersonal contact” and interracial relations was the key to improving racial conditions in Oregon.²⁸ Cannady envisioned *The Advocate* as “a mediator...between the white and Negro races in the state.” In 1933, she wrote that the newspaper’s “sole reason for existing” was to promote “more friendly relations between the races by disseminating [helpful and necessary] information” about “the Negro, what he is doing, how he is faring and what he is thinking.” For a few months in 1933, the paper’s motto was “The Advocate in Every White Home in Oregon.”²⁹ Cannady utilized all the liberties afforded to race women to pursue the role of public relations for her race.

Newspapers were a powerful tool in the West for African Americans to create imagined communities over several thousands of miles.³⁰ For a community to have a printing press represented refinement in a somewhat otherwise wild part of the country, and Portland was no different. Through the *Advocate*, Cannady participated in the black community’s own form of western boosterism to draw more African Americans to Portland. In one edition, which was dedicated to celebrating the community’s most prominent citizens, an article titled: “A Glance of Progress of the Afro-American in Portland” claimed that Portland was a city where “Friction between the races is unknown.” It continued with vignettes that portrayed Black Portland as stable economically, full of beautiful homes and a well-regarded elite citizenry.³¹ Also, like western boosterism, longevity of residence in the community was the name of the game. Articles

that promoted the community's most elite often emphasized how long the individual had been a resident of Portland, or how many years the business was open or how long the home had been owned.³²

Lastly, community leaders like Cannady used the *Advocate* to teach the lessons of the Talented Tenth. For example, a January 21, 1928, letter to the editor argued that “circumspect living and decorous conduct will do much toward stopping so much publicity of the Negro as a criminal,” and urged less privileged African Americans in Portland to behave virtuously always in case they are unjustly arrested. Therefore, the letter concluded, they will “be able to produce a perfect alibi when taken in and questioned as a suspect.” Speaking of the unjust conduct toward African Americans by Portland's police, the author added: “few Negroes have been found guilty of such ...lurid stories of the most dastardly crimes imaginable.”³³ This type of moral proselytizing from elite citizens about disadvantaged citizens on the local level was commonplace in black print media in the West.³⁴

Through various outlets, race women of the Progressive Era laid community cornerstones through building social capital within their own community. This was pivotal for a community that faced many hurdles, the chief being a small population in a state whose vision excluded them. Through public relations programs, black women of Portland fought for racial justice by uplifting the community through benevolence, enhancing the image of the community as viewed by the white majority, promoting themselves as women who adhered to ideals of true womanhood, meanwhile laying the cornerstones of male led civic oriented spheres of influence like the NAACP, and *The Advocate*.



Culture Club Women, The Culture Club was one of several clubs of the Oregon Association of Colored Women's Clubs (OAWC). Courtesy of the Verdell A. Burdine and Otto G. Rutherford Family Collection, gift of the Rutherford Family, Special Collections, Portland State University Library and Black Studies Department, Portland State University.³⁵

Part Two-World War II Generation

While OAWC records are scant in the 1920s and 1930s, we learn much from the ephemera of the post-war generation who dutifully reminded clubwomen and visitors that they stood on the shoulders of the women before them. These accounts illuminate their work during those years. For example, in 1941, Culture Club member Estelle Gragg penned this poem which was printed on Culture Club publications for many years:

*The Culture Club
In the year of nineteen hundred twenty-four...
A Group of young women had few places to go ...
So a social club was organized....
And the fun we had you'd be surprised.*

*We kept this up for many years...
Until Lulu came to the club in tears and asked...
Why is it we can't do something worthwhile...
And Start a scholarship fund for somebody's child?
So under the presidency of Lenora Gaskin
The scholarship fund was begun...
All the members became very busy and started in
Raising funds....Since then the Culture Club
believes in doing something worth while
Each year we award a scholarship to some
deserving youth....
When these youth have reached their goals
It will bring much happiness to our souls*

The Culture Club formed as a social organization, and as many of its kind it embraced a benevolent agenda.³⁶ Once the women recognized their common agency and talents, they were driven to do more for their communities.³⁷ Clubs varied based on interests of the women who formed them and included all types of social and civic goals. The oldest was the Literary Club, which was formed sometime before the founding of the Oregon Colored Women's Council in 1912. The Literary Club fell in line with white women's clubs that tied education to civic empowerment in the late nineteenth century.

What is profoundly different between the two generations, however is the issue of class. While club women in the Progressive Era reflected the most elite of their community, some OAWC leaders and other race women of the WWII generation belonged to the middle class. While African Americans who lived on the fringe of the community did not have the time away from work and home to participate, middle class women leaders like Verdell Rutherford, and Pauline Bradford worked to support the family economy as well.

This WWII generation was deeply inspired by the women before them. As exemplified in the Culture Club poem, club ephemera, and archives of this period often reflect a strong

reverence for the early club women and their work. One notable club is the Harriet Tubman Club which is the only club still operating in Portland today. The current President of Harriet Tubman Club and longtime member (over 60 years), Pauline Bradford, discussed in an oral history, the way that her generation of women were inspired by the older members:

The lady lived next door to me belonged to the Harriet Tubman Club, Mrs. Conway, and she invited both Angie Britton and myself – the neighbors on either side of her – to come and visit the club. These were older ladies...they were interested in getting some younger women involved...I was so impressed with those ladies...I just admired them. Of course they put you to work right away.³⁸

OAWC clubwomen's connection to their female elders and traditions was deep seeded and unwavering, especially when one takes into consideration the vast changes that occurred during the war and in the post war years.

Over 20,000 African Americans migrated into the Portland metro area during World War II. Most were looking for work in the Kaiser Shipyards that dotted the Willamette and Columbia River. These folks migrated from across the country. Recruited by war industry training centers and massive advertising campaigns by the Kaiser Company, Black migrants were promised fair employment and a better future. Upon arrival, it was a different scene. While employment rates among women across America rose like never before (57% increase), African American women in Portland faced harsh discrimination. Beatrice Marshall, a young ship builder from Illinois, described the frustrating and hurtful racism she received for being black in Portland. "They were supposed to have a place for us. They didn't...they told us that they didn't have any openings as steel lays or dress press operators [which Marshall was trained for] and that we would have to accept work as either a painter's helper or sweeper...I finally found out that they had work as drill press operators and steel lays, but they weren't hiring blacks. It was the first time that I ever experienced discrimination. The movies, the cafeteria downtown, and the ones close to the

railroad station all of them were segregated. I really felt hurt...it really did something to me.”

Marshall ended up reaching out to the Urban League, which was founded in Portland in 1945 to address the fervent discrimination against blacks in employment, public accommodations, and housing that the immigrants were facing.³⁹

The influx of African Americans from other areas of the country, to Portland’s small black community caused a rift between the two populations. Black communities across the country were used to organizing and standing against racial oppression in more visible ways. Many new arrivals were confused and dismayed by the way local African Americans seemingly appeased discrimination.

For example, in an oral history interview, Kathryn Bogle, the first black woman to hold a state government position in Oregon and daughter of the prominent Bogle family, recalled how newcomers would stop by her desk at the U.S. Employment Service, angry at her and other local community members. She recalled they would ask her, “Why didn’t you do something about this? Why is it that you folks have been here all this time and haven’t done [anything about the problems] in this community?”⁴⁰ What was not clear to many of the new migrants in Portland was that the peculiar way exclusion and the community’s small size impacted inter-racial relations. What seemed like appeasement, the black community balanced a strict color line, and subverted the status quo by galvanizing a strong community. One subversive strategy enacted by locals was to highlight the most successful of their community-in the face of rampant racial stereotyping. Another strategy was building economic and social service support for the most vulnerable in their community. Both methods celebrated community self-reliance and again, relied heavily on women's work.



A Culture Club meeting in home of one of the clubwomen, 1953. Courtesy of the Verdell A. Burdine and Otto G. Rutherford Family Collection, Gift of the Rutherford Family, Special Collections, Portland State University Library and Black Studies Department, Portland State University.⁴¹

Activism as expressed through community uplift was reflected in the longtime motto of the OAWC, “Lifting as We Climb.” Handed down from the National Branch, the motto rang ever true in the post-war years while club women were charged with the responsibility of public relations and what they called, “bettering Interracial relations.” The OAWC club mission stated that the club’s objectives were “social betterment, for education, civic and legislative improvement, and to promote interracial understanding in order that justice and goodwill may prevail.”⁴²

The pursuit of interracial relations remained a hallmark of the OAWC and continued to be emphasized by the National Branch.⁴³ To clubwomen in Portland, segregating themselves from outside communities was tantamount to other communities segregating themselves from African Americans. Yet, while fostering interracial relations was a strategic way of promoting the race to the white majority, it was more significantly a subtle form of protesting segregation as an institution. This can be seen in the amendment resolutions of 1957, in which Resolution Two states:

The definition of the word “colored” is “one of a race not white” and this in itself is segregation which is contrary to our modern day ... We do not want to discriminate against or be discriminated against, therefore, Be it Resolved that the word “colored” be removed from the title of our State organization.⁴⁴

This resolution provides evidence that club women saw integration in the black club, as a form of protesting segregation. Moreover, it reveals the lengths to which clubwomen were willing to go to protest by example— considering it would strip the club of the African American status and would jeopardize the shared space for black women.

One way in which club women sought better interracial relations, much like Cannady through the pages of *The Advocate*, was to promote those who they felt represented the best of their community among white mainstream audiences. In 1956, OAWC clubwomen appealed to Oregon’s Mothers Council to promote Mrs. E’lise Argletia Reynolds for the award. Reynolds was a past OAWC president and active volunteer, the first African American woman decorated with the honor. Oregon’s Mother of the Year was a predominantly white organization established during the Great Depression to celebrate the various roles mothers played in society. It is unclear how long or how actively the clubwomen appealed to the council, but their archives include newspaper clippings of previous winners as early as 1946. What is clear from archived letters to

NACWC and state elected officials is that Mrs. Reynold's election was a major point of pride for the community.⁴⁵

Then OAWC President Dorothy Vickers, urged the editor of *National Notes* (NACWC magazine) to highlight this achievement: "This is a great honor not only to our Oregon Association, to the National Association, but to our whole race."⁴⁶ The legislative community expressed enthusiasm as well, US Senator Richard L. Neuberger wrote a letter to Mrs. Reynolds stating, "To show my approval more tangibly, I have made a brief speech on the floor of the Senate about the recognition received by you, and I have obtained unanimous permission to include in the Congressional Record of March 8 the text of the articles in the Portland press describing your selection."⁴⁷

Clubwomen made carving out female spaces for advocacy a priority, as many of them were also members and leaders of male dominated organizations such as the NAACP and Urban League. Avel Gordly, the first African American women elected to office in Oregon, daughter of clubwoman Mrs. Beatrice Gordly and granddaughter of OAWC and Harriet Tubman Club founder, Mrs. Randolph, recalled tagging along with her mother to social teas and club meetings where she "learned the ways of ladies and grown women." She also recalled their "elitist and exclusionary" sensibilities, she continued, "clubs and sororities are tied up in class-based expectations about proper femininity and sexual-self presentation." While much of her recollections focus on black women's sororities of Portland such as the La Femmes, both types of clubs were inherently exclusive as they required financial dues and the volunteer capacity to participate. Sororities were similar to other organizations like the OAWC and NAACP because they belonged to a network of national parent chapters that sought to fight segregation by celebrating citizenship. Yet were different because sororities divorced ideal womanhood from

politics and moral stewardship. Through balls, fashion shows, and debutant parties, sorority women demonstrated ideal female citizenship by celebrating beauty and maternal duties and set aside integration into male dominated spheres of influence.⁴⁸

While OAWC women pursued leadership roles in male spheres of influence they also refused to neglect what made them unique as women in those roles. Instead they wedded their skills as leaders in political and civics issues with their roles as mothers, wives and moral stewards. An example in the club's ephemera that reveal a strong sense of pride and value attached to their gender include the Culture Club yearbooks. These booklets that provided club information, by laws and rosters, sandwiched between poems, advice, and vignettes of inspiration that were female oriented. For example, from the late 1930s through the 1940s, the Culture Club, assigned gendered themes to every to every annual meeting. In 1942, the theme was "Women in Today's World." Topics reported on throughout the year included: "Women in Volunteer," "Women in the Home," "Women in War Industry," "Women of the Press," "Women in the Army," "Women in the Navy," "Outstanding Negro Women" "Women in Social Work," "Women in Conquered Europe," "Madame, Chiang Kai Shek," "Women in Britain," and "Women in Russia," and "Eleanor Roosevelt."⁴⁹ These sub-themes reveal that club women had a wide scope of interest with regard to women that was not entirely based on race. Furthermore, their conception of women in the world included the political sphere and was international in scope.⁵⁰

Additional evidence of gendered expressions in the yearbooks as found in the 1958-59 edition, themed: "A Gracious Woman Retaineth Honour," with the following acronym printed on the inside cover:

W – Willing
O – Observant

M – Motherly
A – Ambitious
N – Noble ⁵¹

Beyond simply celebrating womanhood, friendship was emphasized in the club ephemera as well. For example, in a 1940 yearbook, the following poem was printed on page one:

What's A Friend?
One who knows you through
and through
Understands the things you
do
Keeps on pulling just for you
that's a friend
One that trusts you all the
While
grips your hand and shares
a smile
Bears no thought that's
not worthwhile
That's a Friend!

Gordly recalled her mother's letter writing traditions tenderly. Specifically, she spoke about how it felt when they received a trove of cards in the mail during Christmas: "The holiday cards pointed to a world of feeling and history far beyond my small child's world of Portland Oregon."⁵² Though not traditionally seen as a form of social service, letter writing between clubwomen, as well as to non-club members, was a highly valued pillar of work among the OAWC. Like phosphorescence in the sand, proximity between clubwomen, community members, businesses, and public spaces shines through the letters and correspondence archived in the Verdell Burdine and Otto G. Rutherford Family Collection. The proximity of these spaces demonstrates the value clubwomen placed on the practice because quick surveys of the addresses on letter heads reveal that the clubwomen (especially considering their avid door-to-door campaigning) could have made house calls with ease. Whether it was to congratulate a new

mother and father or to send a letter of condolence to the sick, reports on the number of letters written and sent were dutifully noted in meeting minutes and club reports.

While NAACP documents include some religious inspirations, they rarely include vignettes that reflect cultural markings outside of “Robert’s Rules of Order.” These types of cultural expressions are limited to the women’s clubs—even during years when clubwomen were leaders in the NAACP.⁵³ Half of the General Membership of the NAACP were women. In 1947, four out of the five leadership positions were women, excluding the President. And the following year, the Portland NAACP would elect its first female President, Mrs. Marie Smith. 1948-1953 were pivotal years for the NAACP as it was strong enough as an organization to tackle, and sometimes win, major racial justice causes—and female leadership was paramount.

Charlotte Rutherford, daughter of Otto and Verdell Rutherford, explained that it was the women who did much of the support work for the organization:

Our house was the office for the NAACP, there was no building, there was no rented space, so the dining room, pretty much was the office. And not only for the NAACP, but in the mid-fifties the NAACP Federal Credit Union also started in our dining room. My dad made the speeches, but my mom was doing the work. Her mimeograph machine and type writer were the foundation for the organization. I was captured in the house and there would be three or four more neighborhood kids and maybe a few adults working for the organization. And my folks, working like an assembly line...every weekend we were doing this stuff. My mom and dad came out the generation that didn’t expect to get paid, they expected to make things better by any means necessary.⁵⁴

In many letters from Regional and National, women were singled out to manage membership drives or outreach in the community for national pushes of solidarity. This work was aside from the work they managed as leaders.

Following the war, when Mrs. Smith was Vice President and then President starting in 1948, the NAACP took on five main causes: The Portland Civil Rights Ordinance, The Public

Accommodations Act of 1953, fair housing, Portland Public School integration, and the 1953 campaign against Senator Warren Gill as U.S. District Attorney of Oregon. What is clear from a review of these protests is that they required massive communications campaigns between NAACP Executive Board members, General Members, national and regional branches, local newspapers, allied partners in Portland, both individual and organizational, and members of the state legislature and the U.S. Congress. Much of the clerical work surrounding these efforts were left to the wives and daughters of the community. As Secretary of the NAACP Branch, much of this work fell on Verdell Rutherford. On top of her duties as Secretary at NAACP, Rutherford was also President of the Culture Club, Secretary of the OAWC, secretary to the community's only African American Doctor, DeNorval Unthank, wife, and mother of three.

In the late 1950s, Rutherford was Board Director of the NAACP Federal Credit Union, a local institution established to aid African Americans in Portland who were excluded by fair banking practices. Traditionally, board members of similar institutions could rely on the work of Secretaries for support, yet in this case, Rutherford, in addition to her board duties was charged with these responsibilities. Meanwhile Verdell's work supporting, and leading these predominantly male oriented organizations has gone almost entirely unnoticed in Portland Civil Rights historiography. The significant role she, and other women like her, played during the passage of pivotal Oregon and Portland Civil Rights legislation and the NAACP CU is revealed through the women's work evidenced through the Rutherford archive.⁵⁵



Signing of the Civil Rights Bill, 1953, Seated, from left: Philip S. Hitchcock and Mark O. Hatfield. Standing, from left: Edgar Williams, Marie Smith, Ulysses Plummer, Rev. J. Harold Jones, Lorna J. Marple, Verdell Rutherford, and Otto G. Rutherford: Seated, from left: Philip S. Hitchcock and Mark O. Hatfield. Standing, from left: Edgar Williams, Marie Smith, Ulysses Plummer, Rev. J. Harold Jones, Lorna J. Marple, Verdell Rutherford, and Otto G. Rutherford. Courtesy of the Verdell A. Burdine and Otto G. Rutherford Family Collection, gift of the Rutherford Family, Special Collections, Portland State University Library and Black Studies Department, Portland State University.⁵⁶

Rutherford rebelled against traditional gender roles that centered womanhood on domesticity. At the same time her work was never entirely divorced from her role as mother and wife. Woven throughout her meeting minutes and NAACP Credit Union strategizing notes are side notes to herself about recipes, appetite suppression, and markings made by her young daughter Charlotte. These notebooks demonstrate that Rutherford was never separated from her

duties as a wife and mother even while maintaining managerial tasks for racial justice causes in the community.

In the late 1950s, the NAACP would continue to be more involved with the changes to the city incurred by major development projects from the Model Cities Program, school segregation and accusations of communism.⁵⁷ They would elect their second female President, a white woman and close friend of Rutherford's, Lorna Marple, whose election seemed closely tied to her deep connections to the Democratic Party of Oregon, her political relationship with several Oregon legislators and her personal ties to the Rutherford family.⁵⁸ Yet, it was at this there began a decline in membership among the OAWC. Meeting minutes outline the dire situation where leaders pressed upon remaining members to pay their dues and recruit new members. Clubwomen recognized that the younger generation of women seemed disinterested in the clubs.

By the late 1950s, women's liberation alongside other counter culture movements began to take on greater mainstream followers. Members of the younger generation, it started to appear to clubwomen, were not interested in their mother's ways as they had been when they were young women. In the 1960s, women's liberation and the growth of the black liberation front would define greater divides among the generations. While clubwomen and their social justice counterparts believed fervently in interracial relations and nonviolence with persuasion over aggression, the younger generations would no longer hinge their advocacy on white partnerships, rather they would build liberation strategies on their own terms.

Epilogue

At the 2016 Chinese American Citizens Alliance Scholarship dinner in Portland, Oregon, the key note speaker, ninety-one-year-old Bertha Saiget, encouraged a room of high school

graduates to embrace the modern technology most carried in their pockets. This was a different time, she tried to impress upon them, and encouraged them to take advantage of these technologies that earlier generations couldn't have.⁵⁹ Sixty-five years earlier, a National Association of Colored Women's Clubs chairwoman similarly tried to impress upon African American club women across the nation that the technological advantages they had over their mother's generation wielded great power, "Today's world is not the same in which our founders lived. They served in the horse and buggy era; these are the days of atomic energy." Both Bertha and the NACWC Chairwoman were reaching back to the struggles of prior generations of race women and men to build a sense of shared purpose across time.

Creating a shared purpose—through community building and interracial relations—was a hallmark of women's work among Beatrice and two generations of club women. Whether it was letter writing to the infirmed, fundraising for scholarships or establishing a shared history and arts culture, women of the first half of the twentieth century took full advantage of their expectations as women, meanwhile insisting on a place in male spheres of influence. In this way, these female leaders walked a gender line, as they were also forced to walk a color line as African Americans. By persevering through a labyrinth of expectations these women leaders galvanized a community of disparate black families and individual migrants through a shared purpose and shared culture, and laid the cornerstones necessary for civil rights gains actualized for their descendants in latter day Oregon.

¹ Historians rely on the support of archivists, librarians, colleagues, and family and friends. Therefore, I would like to thank my writing partners, Katrine Barber, Dave Hedberg and Joanna Ogden, for the laughs and guidance. A thanks to Jo Ogden again, for reminding me to, "Write *about* something, not *to* something." I also extend great appreciation to Cris Paschild, from Portland State University Archives and Scott Daniels from the Oregon Historical Society Research Library. To the leadership of the Oregon Women's History Consortium for their support throughout my research, thank you. Also to the women community organizers who surround me today and continually inspire me to serve, especially, Joann Hardesty—thank you. Lastly, I thank my mother, Laurie Anne Lang, who has provided me with a bottomless well of inspiration. The cover page image is the Oklahoma Federation of Colored Women Banner, 1910, and represents the colors and ephemera used by the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, image located in the digital article: Kayomi Wada, "National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, Inc. (1896)," *BlackPast.org: Remembered and Reclaimed*, visited: Aug 9th, 2016. <http://www.blackpast.org/aah/national-association-colored-women-s-clubs-inc-1896>.

² I define "women's work" based on Sue Armitage's definition: "primarily domestic in nature." Sue Armitage, *Shaping the Public Good: Women Making History in the Pacific Northwest*, (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2015), 16-7.

³ Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the America West 1528-1990*, (Norton, New York), 194-5.

⁴ Krueger, Colleen, "Black Women's Clubs a Binding Force in Old Portland," *Oregonian*, July 24, 1995, p. B5. Clipping found in Verdell Burdine and Otto G. Rutherford Family Collection, Box 13, Folder 7. Portland State University Special Collections Archives. From here on referred to as the Rutherford Collection.

⁵ Walidah Imarisha, "Why Aren't There More Black People in Oregon," *Conversation Project*, in collaboration with Oregon Humanities, film, accessed on the web on February 2, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWC-8hvP7aY>. It is also important to note that Portland competed for laborers from other west coast cities with larger ports and more job opportunities, like Seattle, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. See: Quintard Taylor, "The Great Migration: The Afro-American Communities of Seattle and Portland During the 1940s," *Arizona and the West* 23:2 (1981): 109–10.

⁶ Karen J. Gibson, "Bleeding Albina: A History of Community Disinvestment, 1940-2000," *Transforming Anthropology* 15, No. 1 (2007): 3–25.

⁷ I use the word "survivance" here, taken from Native American historian Gerald Vizenor, and replacing "Native stories" with "African American experience: "Survivance is an active sense of presence the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimry." Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln: Nebraska, 1999), xvii.

⁸ Photo: The Officers of the Oregon Colored Women's Council, as printed in *The Advocate*, December 20th 1913, The Verdell A. Burdine and Otto G. Rutherford Family Collection, Box 18, Special Collections, Portland State University Library.

⁹ Sandra Haarsager, *Organized Womanhood: Cultural politics in the Pacific Northwest, 1840-1920*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 5.

¹⁰ Armitage, *Shaping the Public Good*, 157.

¹¹ Robert L. Harris, Jr. "Early Black Benevolent Societies, 1780-1830," *The Massachusetts Review*, 20. No. 3 (1979): 603-25.

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- ¹² Wilma A. Dunaway, *The African-American Family in Slavery and Emancipation*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3-4.
- ¹³ Anne Meis Knupfer, *Toward a Tenderer Humanity and a Nobler Womanhood: African American Women's Clubs in Turn of the Century Chicago*, (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 138.
- ¹⁴ "Mrs. L. K. Weeks: Portland Officer of the Juvenile Court," *The Portland Times Annual*, August 2, 1919, 3. I have found no record of the *Portland Times Annual*; it may have been an insert or a temporary black newspaper in the late nineteen-teens. The paper is located in: Box 18, Rutherford Collection.
- ¹⁵ Editor, "Officers of the Colored Women's Council," *The Advocate*, December 20, 1913, 4. Rutherford Collection, Box 18.
- ¹⁶ LaVonne Leslie ed., *The History of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs: A Legacy of Service*, (Xlibris Publishing Company, 2012.), 51.
- ¹⁷ This is evidenced in the OAWC adoption of the NACWC motto "Lifting as We Climb" and the incorporation of many of the NACWC programs towards community betterment. For more see: National Notes, Box 13, Rutherford Collection.
- ¹⁸ Editor, "Officers of the Colored Women's Council," *The Advocate*, 4. Rutherford Collection, Box 18.
- ¹⁹ Rev. WM. A. Magett, "As I See Portland People," *The Advocate*, December 20, 1913, 2; Editor, "Crime Press and the Negro," *The Advocate*, Jan 21, 1928, 2. Rutherford Collection, Box 18.
- ²⁰ This material was gathered during a conversation with Dr. Darrell Millner, Portland State University Black Studies Department, on March 6th, 2015. From now on referenced as: Dr. Millner Interview, March 6th, 2015.
- ²¹ Haarsager, *Organized Womanhood*, xii.
- ²² Negro History Week was established in 1925 by Carter G. Woodson, founder of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH). Daryl Michael Scott, "February is African American History Month," African American History Month, webpage, accessed 2/5/15. <http://www.africanamericanhistorymonth.gov/about.html>
- ²³ "Negro History, Art Shown at Tea," *The Oregonian*, February 16, 1953, 10. Rutherford Collection, Box 13, Folder 8.
- ²⁴ Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 194.
- ²⁵ Northwest Regional Annual Meeting held in Portland, "Northwestern Federation of Colored Women's Clubs Second Biennial Meeting," *National Notes*, Sept 1929, 6. Copy found in: Box 13, Folder 10, Rutherford Collection.
- ²⁶ Raymond Burrell, History of the NAACP Portland Branch: as part of a longer manuscript still a work in progress.
- ²⁷ Kimberly Mangun, "A Force for Change: Beatrice Morrow Cannady's Program for Race Relations in Oregon, 1912-1936," *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, Vol. 96, (2005): 69-75.
- ²⁸ *Ibid*, 69-75.
- ²⁹ Mangun, Kimberley. *A Force for Change: Beatrice Morrow Cannady and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Oregon, 1912-1936* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2010), 45.
- ³⁰ The idea of imagined communities was derived from the work of Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 1991).

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- ³¹ “A Glance of Progress of the Afro-American in Portland,” *The Advocate*, December 20, 1913, 4. Rutherford Collection, Box 18.
- ³² Editors, *The Advocate*, December 20, 1913, whole edition; *The Portland Times Annual*, Saturday, August 2, 1919, whole edition. Rutherford Collection, Box 18.
- ³³ “Crime Press and the Negro,” *The Advocate*, December 20, 1913, 2. Rutherford Collection, Box 18.
- ³⁴ Gaye K. Berardi and Thomas W. Segady, “The Development of African-American Newspapers in the American West: A Sociohistorical Perspective,” *The Journal of Negro History* 75: 96-112.
- ³⁵ Photo: Culture Club Women, The Verdell A. Burdine and Otto G. Rutherford Family Collection, Box 15, Special Collections, Portland State University Library.
- ³⁶ Armitage, *Shaping the Public Good*, 13-4; Haarsager, *Organized Womanhood*, 5-6; Knupfer, *Toward a Tenderer*, 108-9.
- ³⁷ Knupfer, *Toward a Tenderer*, 108-9.
- ³⁸ Triplett, Tasha, “Interview with Pauline Bradford” (2010). *Black United Front Oral History Project*. Paper 1.
http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/blackunited_oralhist/1
- ³⁹ Melissa Lang, “We were nothing but rust”: Beatrice Green Marshall's Wartime Experience,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, 116, No. 2 (2015): 220-33.
- ⁴⁰ Editor, “Collections: Oral History Interview: Katheryn Hall Bogle on the African American Experience in Wartime Portland,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 93 (1992/1993): 403-4.
- ⁴¹ Photo: The Culture Club, 1953, The Verdell A. Burdine and Otto G. Rutherford Family Collection, Box 15, Special Collections, Portland State University Library.
- ⁴² Box 13, Folder 14, Rutherford Collection.
- ⁴³ *National Notes*, Box 13, Rutherford Collection.
- ⁴⁴ Box 13, Folder 10, Rutherford Collection.
- ⁴⁵ Box 13, Folder 13, Rutherford Collection.
- ⁴⁶ I kept the parenthesis in this evidence to show how this was broken away from the professional narrative of the official report, which signifies its importance to the clubwomen, Box 13, Folder 10, Rutherford Collection.
- ⁴⁷ Box 13, Folder 13, Rutherford Collection; Though this award represents a minute shift of acceptance and non-exclusion between the African American and White communities, the letter from Neuberger raises questions about the extent to which the approval was “tangible.” Especially considering the dislocation of the Reynolds from their home on N. Benton Street six months later for the City to make way for the Memorial Coliseum. The Reynolds would be the first of thousands of African American and other poor minority residents separated from their homes in Portland during the late nineteen fifties and early sixties. This dislocation of Blacks was particularly difficult for the community in Portland because it began to fracture their close community network which lead to a breakdown of their local economy and community fabric. For more see: Gibson, “Bleeding Albina,” 3–25.
- ⁴⁸ Avel Louise Gordly and Patricia A. Schechter, *Remembering the Power of Words: The Life of an Oregon Activist, Legislator, and Community Leader* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2011), 44-6.
- ⁴⁹ Loose Yearbooks 1942-1943, Box 15, Rutherford Collection.
- ⁵⁰ 1942 Annual Club Meeting, Box 15, Rutherford Collection.

⁵¹ Loose Culture Club Year Book, 1958-59, Box 15, Rutherford Collection.

⁵² Gordly and Schechter, *Remembering the Power of Words*, 28.

⁵³ There are several club women leaders who also held leadership roles in the NAACP they include, but are not limited to: Beatrice Cannady (her years of service are not clear), Thelma Unthank active in both the regional NAWCW branch, the OAWC as well as the NAACP and Urban League, Verdell Rutherford very active in the OAWC, the Culture Club and the NAACP and founder of the NAACP Federal Credit Union, Mrs. Smith, President of NAACP in 1948-49, member of the Interracial Relations Committee put together by Portland City Leadership, and leader in the OAWC.

⁵⁴ Charlotte Rutherford, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*. Film. Kami Horton, (Portland: Oregon Public Broadcasting, 2015).

⁵⁵ Pivotal Oregon and Portland Civil Rights legislation include, but are not limited to: the Oregon's Fair Employment Practices Law in 1949, the Public Accommodations Law in 1953. For notes on NAACP, Urban League and NAACP Federal Credit Union see notebooks, not in folders in box 13, Verdell Collection; For the establishment of the Credit Union see, *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*, ed. James W. Ivy, Vol. 64, No. 8. Pg. 503.

⁵⁶ Photo: Signing of the Civil Rights Bill, 1953, The Verdell A. Burdine and Otto G. Rutherford Family Collection, Box 6 Folder 4, Special Collections, Portland State University Library.

⁵⁷ For the NAACP and Model cities, see: NAACP of Portland, Oregon records, circa 1914-1986, Box: 1960s. For Segregation in Portland Public Schools see: NAACP Portland Branch Records, Box 4, University of Oregon Libraries, Special Collections and University Archives. For Communism see: Lorna Marple Papers 1942-1960, Box 8, University of Washington Libraries: Special Collections.

⁵⁸ For the election of Lorna Marple see: Lorna Marple Papers 1942-1960, Box 7, 8, 9. University of Washington Libraries: Special Collections. For Lorna's ties to the democratic party see: Lorna Marple collection on the Democratic Party of Oregon, circa 1950-1991, Oregon Historical Society, Davies Family Research Library.

⁵⁹ For Bertha Saiget: This is from my recollection of attending the Scholarship dinner. Per CACA National Vice President, and Portland, Oregon, resident Helen Ying no recording was made of this event, but we have since reached out to Mrs. Saiget in hopes that she may have had a written record of her speech. For NACWC statement: Ruby Moyse Kendrick, "These Sixty Years," *National Notes*, July 28^t-August 3, 1956, 35.

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Archives

Portland State University Special Collections Archives

Verdell Burdine and Otto G. Rutherford Family Collection

Oregon Historical Society Research Library

NAACP Portland Branch Records, MSS 2004

Lorna Marple Papers

University of Oregon Libraries Special Collections and University Archives

NAACP Portland Branch Records

University of Washington Libraries

Lorna Marple Papers 1942-1960