A Common Pattern in an Uncommon Place: An Analysis of the Persistence of Racial Inequality in Waterloo, Iowa

Theresa Shirey, 2014

For the twenty-one years I have lived in Waterloo, Iowa, it has been divided by race. The Cedar River divides the city neatly in half, running from the northwest to the southeast limits of the city, forming what Waterloo’s natives call the “East” and “West” sides, each of which contains its own public high school. As the daughter of a mother who grew up on the East side and a father who grew up on the West side, I heard stories that stressed the differences in life on the rivers two banks. I learned the most about the polarity of my city as I moved through the public schools, quickly picking up on the idea that the West side was the safer side, the whiter side, the richer side. The differing reputations of each side are rooted in historical circumstance, beginning with the first Great Migration and continuing through the Civil Rights era.

The legacy of that initial residential restriction remains present in the city today. Based on the most recent decennial census data, the population of Census Tract 18, in which the first African Americans settled, still has the highest percentage of African Americans than any other census tract in the city, at approximately seventy-five percent. Waterloo’s dissimilarity index of 62.3, measured in 2009, far exceeds that of the other large urban centers in Iowa. Indeed, the Iowa HOME consortium stated in their 2009 report that “historical patterns of racial segregation persist in Waterloo,” indicating that racial segregation, and more generally, racial inequality, persists in the city.

This project answers the question “Why does inequality persist in Waterloo?” by focusing on the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s—the Civil Rights Movement. During these three decades, the racial segregation of Waterloo was directly addressed by multiple desegregation efforts, which targeted housing, employment, and education. I will explain the persistence of this inequality by analyzing the factors during the Civil Rights Era that are responsible today for the persistence of segregation: both factors external to black communities, such as programs and policies that failed to fully address inequality in the city, and factors internal to black communities, such as a disproportionately small middle class that left lower class black communities economically and socially unstable.

During my winter break research period, I spent approximately two weeks conducting primary source research in Waterloo, Iowa. I spent my time transcribing interviews I conducted over the summer with some of Waterloo’s civil rights activists, contacting former interview participants as I edited and revised those transcripts, and working through the unique primary sources found in the Waterloo Public Library local history section, including a binder of Waterloo Courier clippings. The final results and conclusions of my work will be published in the Bowdoin College Hawthorne-Longfellow Library in May as an honors project for the Africana studies department.

Faculty Mentor: Patrick Rael and Brian Purnell

Funded by the Grua O’Connell Research Award

2 Ibid., 10.