

## *African American Women in Montana*

The African American woman's experience in Montana represents a small scaled snapshot of the larger national experience. African American women in Montana fought against the negative stereotypes that plagued both themselves as African American women, and those of their husbands and children. They used the concept of racial uplift to help build their communities, and then used their communities to transform the social realities of Reconstruction-Era Montana. The traditional social roles of American women placed African American women in a unique position to preserve and even create a community and its values. Their roles as mothers, homemakers, and housewives helped these women play a vital part in the development of African American communities in frontier towns of Montana through facilitating as well as participating in activities that traditionally bind members of a community.<sup>1</sup> Many community-focused organizations and activities were influenced by both major ideologies of the early 1900s, specifically Booker T. Washington's advocacy for social and political accommodation versus W. E. B. DuBois's active political protest, and the organizations and activities formed in response to local issues.<sup>2</sup> Tactics within each of these philosophies included creating benevolent societies and social clubs, and promoting an image of the African American family that differed from the negative stereotypical images of the turn of the century through church activities and displaying strong family values.

When discussing the African American social clubs, Quintard Taylor suggests that the men tended to view the women's clubs as "women's work or within the women's sphere" and that they "grossly underestimated the role of these societies in simultaneously preserving traditions and values while improving black life in the city."<sup>3</sup> These benevolent women's clubs succeeded more in promoting the respectability of the African American people in the eyes of the larger society than many of the men's clubs. The women's clubs attempt to improve the general city life for their African American community often involved political engagement. Within the correspondences of the Montana Federation of Colored Women's Club records, many women found themselves writing to their congressmen, senator, local businessmen, or even showing up in their offices to call attention to social injustices within their cities. Many of the clubs worked to raise money for the creation of day nurseries, scholarship funds for local girls and boys, and even getting the local libraries to carry books by important African American authors.<sup>4</sup> Many of the clubs worked to established daycares and kindergartens for working mothers, which happened on the national level when women in general entered the workforce during World Wars I and II.

All of these activities were attempts to reconfigure the stereotypical and negative views in which the larger American society viewed their African American community. Many of the same club women maintained themselves as churchwomen, knowing that such an influence would raise the moral standards of their families and increase their respectability within the larger community, and some African American women followed in the footsteps of Madam C.J. Walker in St. Louis by opening beauty parlors in Montana, in an attempt to build economic self-sufficiency and create a social community outside of the home or church where women could exchange ideas.<sup>5</sup> The *Colored Citizen*, a Helena African American newspaper in 1894, promoted several local shops and actually encouraged young women to go into business for themselves.<sup>6</sup>

As with most Montanans in general, the drought of 1917 and the lack of employment in Montana during the Great Depression and World War I forced a large number of African American families to leave for opportunities found further west. Even with their numbers dwindled; the women of the Montana State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs

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<sup>1</sup> Riley, Peggy. "Women of the Great Falls African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1870-1910". *African American Women Confront the West, 1600-2000*. University of Oklahoma Press, 2003. p 122-139.

<sup>2</sup> Taylor, Quintard. "The Emergence of Black Communities in the Pacific Northwest: 1865-1910". *The Journal of Negro History*. vol. 64 no. 4 Autumn 1979. Association for the Study of African American Life and History. p 342-354.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, Quintard. *The Forging of a Black Community: Seattle's Central District from 1870 through the Civil Rights Era*. University of Washington Press, 1994. p 140.

<sup>4</sup> "Montana State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs". Manuscript archives. Montana Historical Society.

<sup>5</sup> Hine, Darlene Clark. "African American Women and Their Communities in the Twentieth Century: The Foundation and Future of Black Women's Studies". *Black Women, Gender & Families*. vol. 1 no. 1 Spring 2007. University of Illinois Press. p 1-23.

<sup>6</sup> *The Colored Citizen*. 3 September 1894. page 3 column 3. [chroniclingamerica.com](http://chroniclingamerica.com).

continued to work toward their goal of uplifting their community. In the 1950s and '60s, the group worked together to push anti-discrimination bills through the Montana legislature. Through a series of letters, phone calls, and telegrams, the women were able to increase support for a bill that many of the opposition viewed as unnecessary in Montana or feared the loss of business by allowing service to minorities. Scholarships continued to be distributed by the Federation into the 1970s. However, in 1963, the Federation could see that their population was becoming even smaller with very little chance of re-growth, and they voted in the conference the same year that, should the Federation find itself disbanding, the funds remaining in the treasury would be donated to a Montana University. The final conference held by the Federation was in 1971, the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, and two of the remaining four associated clubs had disbanded due to lack of membership. In 1972, just one month before the 51<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the Montana State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs founding, the group disbanded and the remaining funds were donated to the University of Montana in Missoula to be used as a scholarship to any deserving student.<sup>7</sup>

Despite their relatively small numbers, African American women in Montana succeeded in building a sense of community in their cities through civic and political involvement. They inspired and even helped fund young African Americans in their college careers. They owned their own businesses, raised their children, and made sure Montana stayed up-to-date with the national Civil Rights movement. A small scale snapshot of the legacy of the African American Woman's history within the U.S.

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<sup>7</sup> "Montana State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs". Manuscript Archives. Montana Historical Society.