
A city divided

by Justin Carissimo - Tribune Chronicle Correspondent • Dec. 5, 2013 • 2 min read • [original](#)

By JUSTIN CARISSIMO - Tribune Chronicle correspondent ,
Tribune Chronicle | TribToday.com

The release of Lee Daniel's racially charged film "The Butler" reminded Fred Douglas and several other Warren residents of their hometown's fight against segregation.

After leaving New York to help construct the Ohio Turnpike in 1944, Fred Douglas moved into the Warren area's "flats settlement" as his new home. According to a 1947 study of Warren's Urban League, African-Americans lived in the worst sections of the community. These areas recorded high rates of infant mortality, unemployment and several successful brothels.

Douglas graduated from Warren G. Harding, Warren's only high school in the 1950s, with his close friend, the Rev. F. Robert Williams, now pastor of the Baptist church on Martin Luther King Boulevard. They both described Warren as highly segregated.

"Most of the black population lived down in the flats area. They had their own stores, markets, restaurants and even their own black law enforcement," Williams said. "No one went north of the railroad tracks unless you went shopping.

"We were cautious and never hung around too long when we left our settlement."

"The racism was taken care of very carefully," Douglas said. "(The segregation) was just understood. There weren't any signs saying 'no blacks' like there were in the South. If we went to a show, we only had one area we could sit in."

Despite working for the city and paying taxes, Douglas and the rest of African-Americans living in Warren were not welcome to sit near whites in restaurants, date outside of their race or swim in Warren's city pool.

"A friend of mine, a white woman I knew, worked at Packard Electric and couldn't associate with her six children until nighttime. (Interracial dating) was heavily frowned upon," Douglas said.

"She somehow managed to get by, but I knew a couple women that were fired for being with black men."

"Back in those days, the laws were set, and we knew our place. We even had to learn how to swim in the Mahoning River," Douglas said. "We wound up working labor jobs in factories. Blacks were paying taxes, so people began to question why we weren't allowed in places like the Packard Pool."

The Packard Pool became segregated when the property was leased to a community group called the Veterans Swim Club, a membership-only organization that blacks were not welcome to join. Locals eventually protested around the pool, and the NAACP filed a lawsuit.

The pool was open to all races in 1948.

Molly Merryman, a sociology professor at Kent State University, said she was amazed when she first explored Warren's participation in the civil rights movement more than 10 years ago.

In collaborative efforts with her colleague Kenneth Bindas, KSU's chairman of the history department, the professors co-produced the PBS documentary "Invisible Struggles" and received an entry into the Northeast Ohio Journal of History for their piece "Out of the Shadows: Informal Segregation in Warren, Ohio 1954-1964."

Merryman and Bindas became interested in Warren's history while teaching at Kent State University at Trumbull in Champion. Merryman noticed prospective African-American college students would rather drive 15-plus miles to Youngstown State University than drive three miles to Kent's Trumbull branch.

Champion at the time was established as a segregated all-white community, Merryman said.

Merryman considers Warren's role in civil rights as "significant" and "striking." She said that back then, when the Tribune Chronicle was under different ownership, it reported news relating to the black community in a section titled "For Colored Subscribers Only." When Warren citizens protested and marched around the publication's building, the section was removed.

"That level of grassroots activism is so impressive," Merryman said. "Certainly you had the Urban League and the NAACP providing a leadership structure, but it was the people that really began taking on things within the neighborhoods. Those individual actions made a tremendous impact on Warren, and that level of bravery is inspiring."

Merryman said that white residents from the 1950s will exercise their "white privilege" and downplay "the severity" of Warren's history with segregation. She said that its common knowledge to mistake segregation as a phenomena that only affected southern states.

"The past is not something that has no influence today. There are ramifications where people are living, working and going to school today," Merryman said.

"There are the blatant examples because it was cultural. It's not like the law changes and everything is fixed. These racist traditions still have an ongoing legacy."

<http://www.tribtoday.com/page/content.detail/id/596499/A-city-divided.html?nav=5021>