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## Interracial Cooperation in a Decade of Conflict: The Denton (Texas) Christian Women's Inter-racial Fellowship

*Richard W. Byrd*

Marches for voting rights and public demonstrations for an end to the segregation of blacks in public education, transportation, and accommodation as well as in the work place, housing, and credit availability—all these made national headlines during the 1960s in the United States. The national television news and newspapers reported, virtually on a daily basis, violent street clashes between blacks and whites, controversial federal court decisions, bitter deadlocks over racial issues in Congress, and other episodes of conflict, many requiring the use of either federal marshals or troops to maintain or to restore order.<sup>1</sup>

But beyond the glare of struggle, confrontation, controversy, and publicity, equally invidious forms of discrimination in communities of black taxpayers, such as the run-down conditions of rental and public housing and the lack of paved streets, safe drinking water, sewer, storm drains, and other utilities—these have remained invisible. And so have efforts on the local grass-roots level to address these issues, efforts made by interracial groups seeking harmonious, fundamental improvement in race relations and the conditions of daily life. The evidence of such campaigns is scattered in scrapbooks or the occasional dusty academic paper and in local remembrance, where it is usually inaccessible—unrecorded and uncatalogued.

As oral historians have begun to compile and study such recollections on a local and regional level, compensating for a paper

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<sup>1</sup>John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 436-66.

trail of documentation that may be faint or nonexistent, generalizations based on the national patterns of civil rights conflicts can be examined against a wider and more diverse context. And the special capacity of oral history to move beyond documentation of prominent leaders and organizations has permitted new historical insights particularly important to this reorientation.<sup>2</sup>

One important implication has been to redirect attention to the role of women, therefore permitting a more broad definition of the civil rights movement. There is a natural link between the focus of most civil rights history on conflict and struggle reaching to the national level, and a historiography concentrating on the leadership roles of men. Aside from a Rosa Parks or an Angela Davis women have been portrayed, by implication, as insignificant in shaping the history of race relations in the United States. Most treatments of the civil rights movement of the 1960s have focused on the roles of men—in student movements, in violent confrontation with the police in the streets, or in dramatic courtroom settings. In the movement's leadership, among the police, judiciary, journalism, and demonstrators, civil rights struggles involved men almost invariably set in adversarial relationships.

But while conflict and controversy marked deteriorating race relations in a national perspective, local communities of women, particularly southern church women, white and black, were often involved in organized efforts to improve race relations in their communities. Indeed, there was an almost invisible movement during the 1960s whose members voluntarily sought to improve race relations at the local level based upon cooperation rather than confrontation. This cooperative movement operated in the South, was dominated by women and went about its business virtually unnoticed. Their efforts were generally local and non-confrontational and hence likely to go unreported by the media. Although there was little written record of such groups, some documents, artifacts, and memorabilia have remained.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Gilbert C. Fite, "The Rising Place of Local and State and State in American Historiography: A Personal Look at the Last Forty Years," *Locus* 1 (Fall 1988): 2. See Ann Firor Scott, "The 'New Women' in the New South," *Atlantic Quarterly* 65 (Autumn 1962): 476. Also see Carol Kammen, *On Doing Local History: Reflections on What Local Historians Do, Why, and What It Means* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1986), 38. See Maxine Zinn et. al., "The Costs of Exclusionary Practices in Women's Studies," *Signs* (Winter 1986): 290-303.

<sup>3</sup> Virginia Sapiro, *The Political Integration of Women: Roles, Socialization and Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984). See Mollie C. Abernathy, "Southern, So-

This paper examines one such movement in a specific southern community, Denton, Texas. In this instance, scattered evidence that would have remained in bedroom closets or attic trunks, forgotten or discarded, has been rescued from oblivion by persistent interviewers in a sustained oral history project focused on nine black and ten white members of the group—the Denton Christian Women’s Inter-racial Fellowship. Taken together, the resulting documentation helps tell an important story about women working in interracial cooperation on the local level. More broadly, this story may help redirect attention to the search for interracial harmony as a substantially undocumented and under-appreciated theme in the civil rights movement.

For many groups seeking to expand democracy to all citizens, interracial involvement and North-South cooperation seemed essential as both a means and an end. Groups such as the NAACP fostered such cooperation in order to overcome the ignorance of whites about all areas of African-American life and its contributions to American society. The membership of such activist and advocacy groups often overlapped with the membership of local organizations focused on a broader range of cooperative activities, as seen as early as 1932, for instance, in the composition of the board of Tennessee’s Highlander Folk School. Such organizations believed that equal opportunity in integrated, co-educational education would lead to equal opportunity in employment, leaving only social class barriers which they could confront, and try to surmount through political processes, on an equal basis.<sup>4</sup> The white membership of certain churches and interracial advocacy groups had long pursued, particularly in the South, specific goals such as the

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cial Reconstruction and the Church in the 1920’s,” *Louisiana Studies* (Winter 1974): 289-312. Also see Abernathy, “Southern Women, Social Reconstruction and the Church in the 1920’s,” *Louisiana Studies*, 310-11. See Lawrence C. Goodwyn, “Populist Dreams and Negro Rights: East Texas as a Case Study,” *American Historical Review* 78 (December 1971): 1435-56. See William P. Vaughn, “Separate and Unequal: The Civil Rights Act of 1875 and Defeat of the School Integration Cause,” *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly* 48 (December 1967): 146-54.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Kirk Pilkington, “The Trials of Brotherhood: The Founding of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 69 (1985): 59-60. See Norma Taylor Mitchell, “From Social to Radical Feminism: A Survey of Emerging Diversity in Methodist Women’s Organizations, 1869-1974,” *Methodist History*, No. 13 (April 1975): 221-44. Also see Francis H. Thompson, “Arthur Barnett Springarn: Advocate for Black Rights,” *The Historian* 50 (November 1987): 54-66. See C. Alvin Hughes, “A New Agenda for the South: The Role and Influence of the Highlander Folk School, 1953-1961,” *Phylon* 46 (1985): 242-50.

elimination of lynching and poll taxes. Activities had traditionally included organizing speaking tours, letter writing campaigns, petition drives, street demonstrations, and provision of legal assistance and moral support, as well as work to build networks of like-minded individuals.<sup>5</sup>

But the element of widespread personal interracial contact was frequently missing. During the 1940s and 1950s, sociologists and others sought to grapple with white prejudice and discrimination in the historical context of a society marked by pervasive racial segregation. One study found that, "Sheer proximity to blacks appears to be of little value unless it is accompanied by personal contact, but proximity does have a direct effect of its own on racial attitudes when personal contact accompanies it, and the more personal contact there is, the greater the effect of proximity." Another study found the reinforcing consequences of proximity and contact to be particularly important for blacks, leading to greater acceptance of integration among them. The studies suggested that whites and blacks, in dealing with mutual problems that might involve education, housing, employment, or civil liberties, were distrustful and suspicious of each other because they did not interact as frequently as they had contacts with strangers of their own race. The notion of limited interracial contacts was further reinforced, for women, by the limited roles prescribed by the still- powerful culture of "pure, white, Southern womanhood."<sup>6</sup>

Liberal white southern church women actively working to break the barriers which isolated and insulated blacks and whites from one another therefore began to make direct interracial cooperation

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<sup>5</sup>George Edmund Haynes, "Changing Racial Attitudes and Customs," *Phylon* 2 (1941): 28-44. See Henry E. Barber, "The Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching, 1930-1942," *Phylon* 34 (December 1973): 378-89; Kathleen Atkinson Miller, "The Ladies and the Lynchers: A Look at the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching," *Southern Studies* 17 (Fall 1978): 221-40. Although this group was at the outset limited to white only membership this limitation was not for purely paternalistic reasons. For a more detailed examination of this group see Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979). See Ann Wells Ellis, *The Commission on Interracial Cooperation, 1919-1944: Its Activities and Results* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Georgia State University, 1976; University Microfilms, 1978, Ann Arbor).

<sup>6</sup>Mary R. Jackman and Marie Crane, "Some of My Best Friends Are Black: Interracial Friendship and Whites' Racial Attitudes," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 50 (Winter 1986): 460-83. See Virginia Foster Dun, "The Emancipation of Pure, White, Southern Womanhood," *New South* (Winter 1971): 46-54. Also see Rev. Egbert Smith, "Origin and Growth of the Organized Women's Work of the Southern Presbyterian Church," *The Union Seminary Review* 40 (1928-1929): 23-34.

a priority. One such group was the Committee on Women's Work of the Presbyterian Church, U.S., which emphasized making the educational system serve as a "forum" wherein the two races might become better acquainted. But the Presbyterian colleges they considered had all black students and virtually all white faculty, and so provided structurally limited possibilities for black-white cooperation.<sup>7</sup> And even as grudging acceptance of the 1954 Brown decision spread slowly through the South and nation, permitting contact and at least the possibility of increased, mutual acceptance between the races in school and college settings, the question remained as to what to do about relationships between southern blacks and whites in adult and community settings, accustomed as these groups were to more than three centuries of segregated isolation from one another.

One response was political, and led in the direction of an increasingly exclusive black movement. The presidential election of 1960 began to demonstrate the raw voting power of urban blacks and their impending impact on American politics of the future.<sup>8</sup> Following the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, a new generation of national black leaders, mostly male, increasingly questioned the involvement of liberal white activists in the movement. It seemed to them that liberal white activists neither fully understood what blacks wanted nor wanted to take the time to find out. They argued that blacks themselves needed to be more self-reliant in advancing their own interests, and in challenging white society in a struggle for power.<sup>9</sup>

All this captured the national spotlight, obscuring to a great extent another response developing among women in southern communities like Denton, Texas. Here, southern liberal white church

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<sup>7</sup> Carrie Washington, *The Roles of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., the Presbyterian Church in the U.S., and the United Presbyterian Church of North America in the Establishment and Support of Five Black Colleges* (Ph.D Dissertation: North Texas State University, 1986), 9-263.

<sup>8</sup> For an example of such an occurrence as well as a precedent setting approach to achieving peaceful integration in a southern college, see Ronald Marcello, "The Integration of Intercollegiate Athletics in Texas: North Texas State College as a Test Case, 1956," *Journal of Sport History* 14 (Winter 1987): 286-316. See Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President, 1960* (New York: Pocket Books, 1961), 275-85. For a later detailed evaluation of the efficacy of desegregation of the public schools see Richard R. Scott and James McPortland, "Desegregation as National Policy: Correlates of Racial Attitudes," *American Educational Research Journal* 19 (Fall 1982): 397-414.

<sup>9</sup> Herbert H. Haines, *Black Radicals and the Civil Rights and the Civil Rights Mainstream, 1954-1970* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 46-76.

women initiated an effort to find out how their black counterparts lived and to foster a common bond of womanhood. In forming the Denton Christian Women's Inter-racial Fellowship, they found a group of black women willing and interested in working together with them. In what follows, the history of this group has been reconstructed, necessarily based on oral interviews with nineteen women because the group had kept no documentary records in the usual sense. But interview evidence has been corroborated where possible, among the interviewees, their personal documents and memorabilia, and relevant secondary literature.<sup>10</sup>

In the Spring of 1964 a Presbyterial meeting convened at the First Presbyterian Church of Wichita Falls, Texas. In attendance at this regional women's gathering were Euline Brock, wife of a professor at North Texas State College, and Dorothy Adkins, public school teacher and the wife of another North Texas State College professor, both from Denton, Texas. The theme of the meeting was "Reconciliation," a euphemism for cultivating harmonious race relations; the program included a prepared dialogue between a white woman and her black domestic.

There had been a local crisis prior to the meeting in which, Brock recalled, "As a courtesy they had invited the wife of the pastor of the other Presbyterian church in Wichita Falls to give the devotional; and she refused to do it because she didn't want to be involved in the theme of reconciliation because she hated Martin Luther King and everything he stood for, and she told them explicitly in those terms." Brock was then asked to lead the devotional in place of the woman who had refused to participate. After some soul searching she agreed to take part but,

what I wound up doing, on the advice of my pastor, was throwing away the scriptures that they had sent me that were supposed to be the center of the devotional and using the story of David and Uriah and the question of recognizing that before we start attacking a sin or trying to make changes, we ought to find out who the sinner is and who needs to be changed. The answer is, of course, that we are and that we are the ones that need to be changed. I could tell how people reacted to that. Several people came up and said, "That was wonderful, that's what we needed to hear." Other people said, "Honey, you look so pretty in that red hat."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Bessie Harden, "Oral Interview with Bessie Harden," OH 728 (University Archives, Willis Library, University of North Texas, Denton, Texas), 13. All interviews cited herein are housed in the University Archives, Willis Library. See Jean Kooker, "Oral Interview with Jean Kooker," OH 711, 25.

<sup>11</sup>Euline Brock, "Oral Interview with Euline Brock," OH 707, 25-7. During the period

During the drive back to Denton, while the two women in front “were talking about...recipes,” Brock and Adkins had a “really earthshaking” discussion concerning the mixed response to the dialogue and the devotional. The two women resolved to move “in the direction of doing something that [we] thought might be meaningful and lasting.” The result was the creation of the Denton Christian Women’s Inter-racial Fellowship, which had its first meeting early in 1964. According to Adkins, “The first aim was just to get acquainted and understand what was going on in both communities and ways we could increase that friendship and understanding.”<sup>12</sup>

An almost immediate problem arose in the white women’s efforts to get to know black women: there were relatively few blacks in Denton. The 1960 census reveals that blacks in Denton County constituted some 6 percent of the population, considerably less than the national proportion of 10.6 percent; In the city of Denton the 1,954 blacks constituted some 7.8 percent of the 1960 population

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1 January to 1 July 1964 and the formation of the Denton Christian Women’s Inter-racial Fellowship there were 116 civil rights-related stories in the *Denton (Texas) Record Chronicle*. Foremost among them were stories relating to the efforts of southern Senators to filibuster passage of the Civil Rights Bill, followed by demonstration-related stories. For sample scripts, see United Presbyterian Women, *1964 National Meeting Report* meeting held at West Lafayette, Indiana on the campus of Purdue University 22-27 June 1964. See Richard W. Byrd, personal files, Denton Christian Women’s Inter-racial Fellowship. Also see “Report from Annual Meeting,” *Concern* (October 1964): 2-32 and Dorothy Adkins, personal files, “Counting the Cost.” Also see Euline Brock, personal files, “Devotional.”

<sup>12</sup>Brock OH, 707, 27 and Brock personal files, “Devotional.” One difficulty in dealing with oral history is that there is often a dearth of documentary evidence. Recollections of the interviewees often conflict. In this instance the founding of the Fellowship has been dated as the Spring of 1964 [See *Denton Record Chronicle*, 25 October 1967] and March 1964 [see *Denton Record Chronicle*, 24 October 1977]. Members of the group maintain that the group held its first meeting within 6 to 8 weeks following the Presbyterian meeting in Wichita Falls. A story on page 6A of the *Wichita Falls [Texas] Record Times*, entitled “Church Witness is stressed at UPWO Meeting” dated 5 May 1964 indicated that such a meeting was held in Abilene, Texas not Wichita Falls. Discussions with archivists of the regional and national Presbyterian Church offices in Dallas, Texas; Denton, Texas; Montreat, North Carolina; and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania revealed that records for such meetings between 1963 and 1966 do not exist for some reason. Dr. Brock maintains that the group utilized suggested scripts and other materials from the national meeting of United Presbyterian Women. This meeting was not held until 22-27 June 1964, see fn 11. The devotional Dr. Brock gave at the first meeting of the Inter-racial Fellowship followed along the lines suggested from the national women’s meeting. See Richard W. Byrd, personal files, Denton Christian Women’s Inter-racial Fellowship, untitled script. See Beth Davis, personal files, Denton Christian Women’s Inter-racial Fellowship. Also see Dorothy Adkins, “Oral Interview with Dorothy Adkins,” OH 705, 7 and Jean Kooker, OH 711, 37-8.



of 26,844, still less than the national proportion.<sup>13</sup>

Although a distinct minority, Denton blacks had little to fear from the white townspeople, for unlike a large number of Southern communities, the town did not have a history of racially motivated violence. Situated in the Cross Timbers section of Texas, Denton more closely resembled West Texas than it did the Black Belt of East Texas. In 1860 the county numbered only 251 slaves in a population 5,031; more than 40 percent of the county's voters had opposed secession in 1861. While Denton blacks were subject to the usual legal and extralegal Jim Crow restrictions, their small numbers were insufficient for the white majority to perceive them as a threat to existing mores. And although strict segregation dictated the area in which blacks could live, this section bordered on the town square, Denton's only business district; the proximity assured that the races had frequent contact. Most important, the business of Denton was education, which generally served as a moderating influence in race relations. Two state-supported institutions, North Texas State College and Texas State College for Women, were the dominant economic forces in the community and were the major employers of both blacks and whites. As historian Ronald Marcello notes,

Denton's racism was characterized by its moderation. Those who were intolerant, bigoted, and prone to react with violence toward any concession on matters of race were not a serious problem. A coterie of bankers and businessmen ran the town, and they were proud of their brand of "tolerance." Although blacks constituted an underclass tied to menial service jobs in the town's factories and colleges, white Denton considered itself a model of racial cooperation, taking pride in the town's "better class of colored citizens," the teachers and the preachers. Blacks, however, understood the etiquette of race relationships under which they were forced to operate. White people dictated the ground rules, and the benefits went only to those blacks who conformed. No leader in the community or on the two campuses was openly willing to attack segregation.<sup>14</sup>

For all this moderation, like their counterparts throughout the nation Denton blacks were highly suspicious of whites. In partic-

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<sup>13</sup>United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census PC(1) 45B, 45-249 and United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, vol. 1, 1-145. The demographic information of the 1960 edition of the *City Directory* (Denton, Texas) reflected the United States Census data by race for Denton but the 1950 edition made no distinction nor did the 1970 edition.

<sup>14</sup>Marcello, "The Integration of Intercollegiate Athletics in Texas," 292.

ular blacks were suspicious of activist whites who sought to undertake “conversation” and “friendship,” not to mention attack segregation and recruit members into an interracial women’s group. Jean Kooker, a white public school teacher, recalled that

The blacks’ attitude was, “What could they possibly want? They [white women] never came on a friendly visit. What could a white person want?” There were several who said to their black friends, “They’re a bunch of do-gooders. What do they want? They’ll be gone in six months. They don’t really want to be friends!” There were several black women who had this feeling from what they had seen in the community and what they had known. Because black and white had been so separate.

The founders of the Fellowship sought to recruit even numbers of blacks and whites in an effort to help overcome the suspicion of blacks. Co-chairpersons, one white and one black, were designated to ensure equality of black-white participation and decision, while promoting shared responsibility for group activities. It soon became evident to blacks that the white women were taking pains to see that socioeconomic status differences between the races did not hinder the group’s operation. And these were not the only differences characterizing the group. Although a majority of the black women were native Texans, if not Dentonites, the white women were non-native Dentonites, many were from out of state. Being outsiders to the community, they remained suspect until they had become more well known to the locals, black and white. In terms of educational level the women were atypical of the U.S. population: most of the blacks were high school graduates and most of the whites had college degrees; some of them had master’s degrees.<sup>15</sup>

According to Euline Brock, the Fellowship’s first meeting was a somewhat strained affair for this diverse group of women:

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<sup>15</sup>Kooker, OH 711, 19; Pat Cheek, “Oral Interview with Pat Cheek,” OH 731, 22-4; Brock, OH 707, 30-63. For a partial explanation of the distrust that Texas blacks held for and the isolation they felt from erst-while liberal whites see Goodwyn, “Populist Dreams and Negro Rights: East Texas as a Case Study,” 1435-56. For some sense of the isolation blacks in Denton felt see Linnie McAdams, “Oral Interview with Linnie McAdams,” OH 718, 5-19, wherein she described a “triangle of iron” in the railroad tracks which separated black southeast Denton from the rest of the community. See Willie Frances McAdams, “Oral Interview with Willie Frances McAdams,” OH 730, 37-50; Ann Barnett, “Oral Interview with Ann Barnett,” OH 710, 15-7. See Katherine McGuire, “Oral Interview with Katherine McGuire,” OH 722, 18-28. See Trudy Foster, “Oral Interview with Trudy Foster,” OH 706, 3-9.

It was very tense because none of us had ever, ever been in an integrated meeting of that sort. There was much bustling about, serving refreshments and so forth, and the whole conversation was as if race didn't exist and there were no problems. It was just strictly very minor, social chit-chat. We were all kind of floundering about for what we would talk about, but we discovered the very first thing that would last through many meetings—our children. We all had children, and so we fell to talking about our children—"how many children do you have, how old are they, where do they go to school?"

The discussion at the second meeting was more structured as well as revealing. Brock recalled:

We had this dialogue that was read, that we had brought home from Presbytery. We'd gotten the material from our national organization. That opened up some general discussion of racial issues and problems that black people had in the Denton community. I remember Betty Kimble saying that she was waiting her turn in the Singer Sewing Shop, and a woman came in and started, as white southern women traditionally did, you know, just to shove on ahead because there was nobody waiting if there was only a black woman waiting. Betty said she stepped right up and said, "I believe I was here first," or "It's my turn," or something. I remember everyone's marveling and thinking that that took quite a lot of courage for her to do that.

After the first two meetings, the group's initial project developed. White and black women were paired and charged with the responsibility of getting to know each other and each other's children. This process is recalled as propelled by a powerful desire to reach out across barriers, an attitude suggested in the group's response to the telling of Betty Kimble's episode in the sewing shop.<sup>16</sup>

Fellowship meetings began to be held in black and white homes alternately. By design, one early result of interracial activity was that the white women went into black homes and saw, some for the first time, how black families lived. But in the process the white women learned how many values and concerns they shared with the black women. Conversely, blacks went into white homes and neighborhoods, some for the first time as other than domestic employees, to learn how white families lived.

In the course of the cross-community meetings, racial stereotypes held by each community began to wither away. Whites were surprised to learn that blacks had stereotyped them as insincere,

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<sup>16</sup>Brock, OH 707, 31-2; Barnett, OH 710, 17-27.

superficial, “liberal do-gooders.” In the course of one meeting the white women were shocked, to hear their guest speaker, Harve King, Assistant Dean of Students at North Texas State College and the brother of a Fellowship member, remark to them, “Well, you white women sitting out there, I know who you are. You go to your bridge clubs, and you just sit there mute while those nigger jokes are told, and you don’t do anything about it.” Pat Cheek, a white public school teacher, quickly replied: “No, we don’t! We never allow those things to be said in our presence. We always say, ‘excuse me, I don’t want to hear that word,’ or ‘you are speaking to the wrong person.’”<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, the white women began to recognize their own stereotypes about blacks. Dorothy Adkin’s recollection was fairly typical of the white women:

When we visited their homes, we noticed how well kept their were. That stereotype of the black people being lazy and not knowing how to work was certainly false, as far as our group was concerned. I always came back to feeling, “How on earth do they do it all?” I just couldn’t imagine. For so many of the women at that time, the only job that was available to them was keeping someone else’s house; and to know that they had gone off to somebody else’s house, probably a different house every day for a whole week, and then go into their own home and see that it’s spotless too, really impressed me that they were so energetic.<sup>18</sup>

Since the Fellowship was founded during the period of transition to integrated schools, the scholastic performance of their children was a subject of interest and the roots of the group’s second project soon developed. It was a trying time for blacks as well as for whites. Blacks voiced their concern over the closing of the previously all black Fred Moore High School. Many blacks did not want the schools integrated, much less to have the black high school closed, despite the Brown decision mandating integration. Bessie Harden recalled, “The black people hated [the closing of Fred Moore High School] and they hate it today...They [black community] had no say...They [Denton Independent School District] didn’t ask them; they just integrated.” Among the concerns of black parents were that their cheerleader daughters and football playing sons

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<sup>17</sup>Brock, OH 707, 41-3. See Adkins, OH 705, 16-8; Kooker, OH 711, 6-19 and Norvell Reed, “Oral Interview with Norvell Reed,” OH 720, 35. See Linnie McAdams, OH 718, 19; Harden, OH 720, 35-8. Also see Cheek, OH 731, 24-5. See McGuire, OH 722, 13-5.

<sup>18</sup>Adkins, OH 705, 16; Harden, OH 728, 23-4.

would constitute such a minority in integrated schools that both their academic and extracurricular performances would be obscured by the white majority.<sup>19</sup>

Another concern of the members of the Fellowship was that the academic performance of blacks would be embarrassingly poor. According to Euline Brock, who was involved in a collateral tutoring program for the black students who transferred across town to previously all-white Denton High School: “Two or three seniors graduated that year [Spring 1964]. It was very, very important—I mean, it was critical—that they graduate because not only was the whole white community looking at them, but the black community was saying, ‘Are they going to make it?’ ”

Black students had been able to walk to the neighborhood Fred Moore School; white students were able to walk to Denton High School. Some whites, in multiple car families drove or had their mothers drive them to Denton High. But black families considered themselves fortunate to own one car which, typically, was used by the household’s male member for his trip to work. In the absence of busses, the trip across town to Denton High would be a time consuming burden on black students. And so, Bessie Harden recalled, the volunteer tutors also provided crosstown transportation for the black students to Denton High. While public transportation and school bussing problems erupted across the nation, in Denton Bessie Harden was able to say that, “Our [white] friends were just beautiful because they were afraid that our children would drop out. Their children were walking [to school], but they [white women] were coming and picking ours up.” The commitment of white Fellowship members to the tutoring and transportation programs helped dissolve the mistrust and suspicion Denton black women had for the motives of the white women in starting the group. The two programs served as a tool which aided in recruiting more black women into the Fellowship.<sup>20</sup>

As a result, word began to spread throughout southeast Denton’s black churches about the sincerity of the white women’s ac-

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<sup>19</sup>Brock, OH 707, 37-40. In Texas, for high-schoolers to be overshadowed or excluded from football is tantamount to ex-communication. See Kooker, OH 711, 7; Willie Frances McAdams OH 730, 20-5.

<sup>20</sup>Harden, OH 728, 14; Reed, OH 720, 13. Denton had no public transportation system and few blacks owned one, much less two cars. See Willie Frances McAdams, OH 730, 8-25; Brock, OH 707, 30-66; Kooker, OH 711, 1-3. Also see Carol Riddlesperger, “Oral Interview with Carol Riddlesperger,” OH 712, 31.

tivities, their dedication to insisting on equal black-white participation, and the respectability of the group's activities. There was a concerted effort on the part of the white women to enlist black women into the Fellowship; they actively recruited members from the churches of southeast Denton and through overlapping memberships in national organizations such as the NAACP, the League of Women Voters as well as among those involved in Democratic Party politics. This commonality of membership led to the recruitment of several women prominent in the black community.<sup>21</sup>

1964, the year the Fellowship was founded, was also a presidential election year, and the Denton Fellowship did not shrink from playing an active role. The group's founders were active in local Democratic Party politics and the League of Women Voters. During the 1964 primary election, the Fellowship successfully fielded a black candidate, Othella Hill, who was elected chair of the Denton County Democratic Executive Committee. Prior to 1964 blacks had been absent from local politics for some time. "Blacks were not a part of any elective bodies. [They] weren't on the school board or the city council. . . . Some women in particular felt that that needed to be changed." In order to address the problem it was necessary to get blacks involved in the political process, at least registered and out to the polls. "There were not very many people from the black community involved in the Democratic party," according to Jean Kooker, "because of the way the precincts were divided—either intentionally or accidentally—southeast Denton was the black area at that time and they were all in one precinct." Bessie Harden related that "a lot of people [blacks] felt like it just didn't matter. . . . because they had not been convinced that it does matter."<sup>22</sup>

Black and white pairs of Fellowship members went door to door to encourage residents of southeast Denton to register to vote. Ann Barnett recalled the 1964 voter registration drives:

I think we were mainly concentrating on southeast Denton because we were trying to get people registered to vote and get them out to vote. I think a lot of people had been very intimidated. If I recall, that's one

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<sup>21</sup>Riddlesperger, OH 712, 34; Brock, OH 707, 23-47. Brock, OH 707, 23-8; Kooker, OH 711, 28-9; Linnie McAdams, OH 718, 25; Barnett, OH 710, 15-7.

<sup>22</sup>Linnie McAdams, OH 718, 19-20. Also see Kooker, OH 711, 25-6. See Harden, OH 728, 29-36.

thing that was really a big issue, that blacks had been afraid to vote and had been intimidated, so we were really encouraging them.<sup>23</sup>

The elimination of state poll taxes by ratification of the Twenty-fourth Amendment on January 23, 1964 had ended one of the last obstacles to black voter registration and electoral participation. The tenacity of the Fellowship in seeking out blacks in order to register them to vote, indeed bringing voting registrars into the black community for added convenience, was met with enthusiasm. Willie Frances McAdams recalled:

Oh, we had voting drives...We went as a group and we registered voters. We volunteered to take people to the polls to vote. We went from door to door canvassing voters...Yes, I think we [made a difference]. I certainly do think we did because a lot of people that would have really not voted were made aware.

And Pat Cheek recalled:

We went down [to southeast Denton] and sat all day sometimes at the little small stores, home-owned stores, in the black neighborhoods. We had comments from blacks and whites who said "I'm seventy-five years old and I ain't never voted, and I ain't never going to." But I do remember registering some who were excited to be registered to vote.

Indeed, for some members of the Fellowship the presidential election of 1964 became a crusade. In conjunction with the national civil rights movement, campaigning became a device that "was building women's self-confidence and giving them the opportunity to break out of stultifying roles."<sup>24</sup> Perhaps of greater significance, in contrast to the voting registration efforts by outsiders in Mississippi during 1963 which had resulted in the deaths of several people, was the fact that in Denton all the participants in the drive were local people. And there was perhaps an additional incentive for local effort by whites as well as blacks—North Texas Democrats seemed more concerned about possible Republican successes at all levels of government than did other Southern Democrats. The Fellowship recognized the need to recruit more

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<sup>23</sup>Barnett, OH 710, 26. Also see United States Government Document, *The Constitution of the United States: Bicentennial Edition* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1987), 24.

<sup>24</sup>Barnett, OH 710, 24-6; Harden, OH 728, 30; Billie Mohair, "Oral Interview with Billie Mohair," OH 713, 24. See Willie Frances McAdams, OH 730-5; Kooker, OH 711, 25; Adkins, OH 705, 29. Also see Cheek, OH 731, 32. See Alice Echols, "The Radical Feminist Movement in the United States 1967-75." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1986.

blacks into the party's rank and file and to champion their cause at the grass roots level. Euline Brock said that, "It seemed to be that there was no way you could be a Republican and have what I considered the 'right' ideas about racial matters." Referring to the 1964 election in particular Brock related:

In 1964 the issues were so clear cut. There were no ambiguities in that election...our group was totally Democratic...If you were interested in racial issues, if you were interested in opportunities for blacks, there was just no way that you could have been supporting the Goldwater campaign.

Brock then described how the Fellowship was able to marshal its forces and get the newly registered Democrats out to the polls:

It was Texas Republicans that spawned the Goldwater movement. They had a textbook organizational technique; I mean, it was just wonderful [facetious comment]. As a matter of fact, I got a copy of their textbook...and used it in the 1964 election.<sup>25</sup>

While it would be difficult to claim that the registration and electoral participation of Denton's blacks had much impact in the 1964 Democratic landslide for Texan Lyndon B. Johnson, the registration of blacks did have a great local impact. With encouragement from the Fellowship, black candidates ran for local offices for the first time since the demise of the Progressive movement, if not since Reconstruction. Black and white candidates from the Fellowship's roster of members were fielded and supported by the membership-at-large. As a result, Denton blacks began to feel more like participants in a system which they were learning could work for them. As Bessie Harden said of the effects of increased black political participation on local officials, "Well, they'll get so much flak. We can get on the telephone and call the city council at home or wherever they are. We know what to do."<sup>26</sup>

The focus of Fellowship work went well beyond human relations and electoral politics, and much effort came to focus on the conditions of daily life that so separated black and white experience

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<sup>25</sup>Brock, OH 707, 7-51. Also see Brock, OH 759, 46-50. The Democrats of Denton County, Texas were highly concerned by the Goldwater candidacy. Since 1962, the first time the Republicans had held a primary election in Denton County in many years, Republican registration had greatly increased with a surge of newcomers from out-of-state taking up residence in Denton. See John P. Frendreis, "Migration as a Source of Changing Party Strength," *Social Science Quarterly* 70 (March 1989): 211-219. See also Riddlesperger, OH 712, 33-4.

<sup>26</sup>Riddlesperger, OH 712, 31; Harden, OH 728, 32-8; Cheek, OH 731, 18-33.



in Denton. One condition that had made it so difficult for the black women to maintain the “spotless” homes mentioned earlier was the absence of paved streets in southeast Denton. “The streets over here were not paved at all,” Willie Frances McAdams recalled, “and it was really horrible down here when it was raining and bad weather.” Owing to the vagaries of Texas weather these streets featured either a highly abrasive airborne dust when dry or an indescribable muck when it rained. Pat Cheek described this as “sandy shell caliche.” Sand and muck both found their way into the homes of blacks in southeast Denton. Furthermore, there was no drainage system or sidewalks along the streets in this area, and in fact there was no water or sewer system at all for most southeast Denton residents. Linnie McAdams’s neighbors had only an outdoor water faucet shared with others and a privy. Euline Brock described McAdam’s neighborhood:

Right next door to them was one of those absentee landlord sort of things. It could have been transplanted from the slave quarters on a plantation or a sharecropper’s cabin. Well, in sharecropping it’s more scattered out. But it was sort of an “L” shaped complex. They weren’t connected at the corner, but there was a row of one-room shanties down this side [gesture] and another row on the west.

City ordinances did not help the paving situation either. Linnie McAdams described those regulations as follows:

Prior to that time [1966], they insisted on rather an antiquated system whereby you had to have a certain percentage of the people on the street agree to (pay a share for paving) or else you couldn’t do it. You could almost never get that number because of the mixture of absentee landlords who would never sign because they didn’t care. They didn’t have to drive on those streets that were muddy.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Cheek OH 731, 31-48. See Harden, OH 728, 11; Brock, OH 707, 55-9. See Willie Frances McAdams, OH 730, 10. Also see Linnie McAdams, OH 718, 20. See Trudy Foster files, University Archives, Willis Library, University of North Texas, Denton, Texas, “Questionnaire on Paving of Streets Sponsored by Women’s Inter-racial Fellowship.” Members of the Fellowship interviewed 174 southeast Denton landlords, homeowners, and tenants as an educational device prior to conducting a petition drive to get the streets of southeast Denton paved. The questionnaires were completed over a five-month period in 1968. See “Co-operation: 2 Way Street,” *Denton Record Chronicle*, 29 November 1970, 6A. The project had begun, however, in 1966. See Trudy Foster, personal files, poster, “These Are The Houses Owned By Elders In Our Church.” One of the photographs has a processing date of September 1966. The reverse side of the poster indicates that the remaining photographs were taken by Fred J. Connell, a North Texas State College graduate student and a volunteer interviewer for the Fellowship throughout 1967.

In response, the Fellowship organized a petition campaign directed at paving six of the streets. Trudy Foster, a white real estate agent, was instrumental in gaining the signatures of non-absentee landlords. In the absence of the landlord's signature, Texas law permitted a quick deed easement variance which could be signed by the resident. Although Foster was well known through her zealous work within the Fellowship and through her work as a preschool volunteer and tutor, several problems hindered progress. Absentee landlords, black and white, if located, were reluctant to be assessed for the cost of paving. Moreover, several black homeowners were unemployed single women with dependent children who could not afford the cost of paving. To make matters even more difficult, many tenants did not know who their landlords were or how to locate them.<sup>28</sup>

In the course of the Fellowship's 1966 research to determine who the property owners were, Foster discovered that several of the white landlords were members of her church, Trinity Presbyterian. She had photographs of the substandard rental dwellings made into a poster which she titled, "These are the Houses Owned by Elders in Our Church." The names of the property owners listed on the reverse of Foster's poster consisted of individuals not only prominent in the church but in the community at large. Foster placed the poster on an easel in the vestibule of the church on Sunday mornings. The display caused quite a sensation among the congregation for several weeks and demands for its removal were made. Over time Foster was eventually able to convince most of the landlords that it was in their financial interest to clean debris from their lots and to make repairs to their rental properties so as to increase the value of the property while bringing down fire insurance rates. Local government officials became interested inasmuch as such a program would raise the property tax base and hence tax collections while improving standards of public health, presumably making Denton a more attractive place for businesses to locate. Gradually, the landlords began to clean up and make repairs to their properties, and even to sign the street paving petition. Fellowship members strongly supported Foster's leadership in getting the streets paved and embarrassing landlords into making overdue

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<sup>28</sup>Trudy Foster, OH 706, 21.

repairs to their rental properties in southeast Denton.<sup>29</sup>

While violent confrontations were being reported nationally in the wake of the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, in Denton, the drive to ensure that all residents of the city of Denton had paved streets at taxpayer expense continued to gain momentum peacefully. During the early part of 1968 the Fellowship women recanvassed the landlords and tenants who had been queried during 1966, this time expanding the area surveyed to encompass twenty-four streets. The effort now involved some twenty members of the Fellowship and their spouses, as well as several concerned college students, and they reported their findings to the Mayor Cecil F. (“Zeke”) Martin’s Committee on Development in Southeast Denton.<sup>30</sup>

There was understandable suspicion among black residents fearful of losing even a portion of their land as an easement, and there was a major financial concern among those blacks who were unemployed, under-employed, or living on fixed incomes. In order to get their streets paved, the property owners on each street had to follow a complex process: a large portion of the owners on the street, varying in accordance with the total length of frontage owned, had to agree to each pay one-third of the cost of paving the length of their individual frontage, after which the City Council had to declare the project appropriate, bid it, and assess and collect the costs. All this provided ample room for obstruction, confusion, and delay.<sup>31</sup>

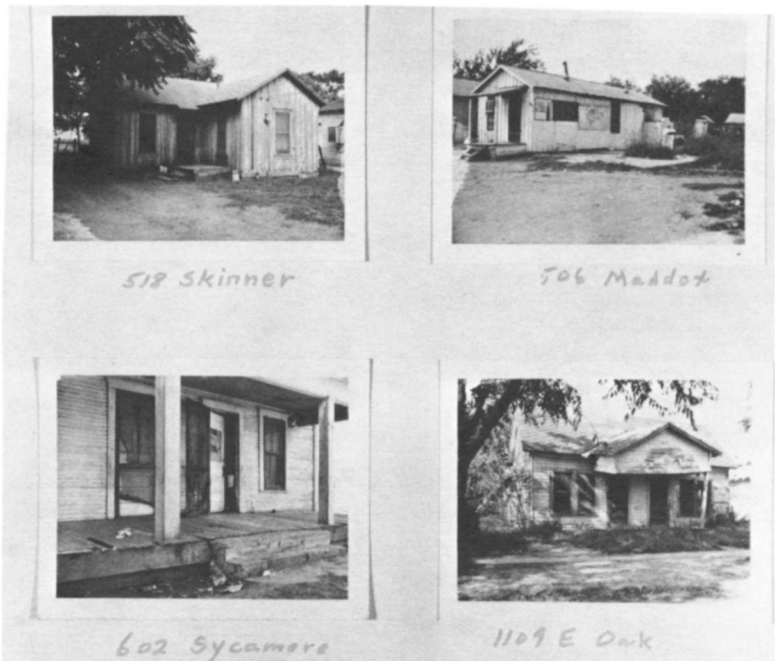
The Fellowship assembled data on 174 property owners and residents otherwise unavailable in public records: this documented a substantial level of absentee ownership. Many residents were hesitant to take advantage of the quick deed easement provision

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* Also see note 27. A personal conversation between Betty Burch, University of North Texas History Department, Administrative Assistant and life-long Denton resident, and the writer on 27 April 1989 verified the ownership of properties. See Linnie McAdams, OH 718,20. Also see Roy Hamric, “Paving Gets A Close Look: Women’s Group Surveys Southeast Denton Streets,” *Denton Record Chronicle*, 3 January 1968, 1. See Adkins, OH 705, 9-10.

<sup>30</sup> Foster, OH 706, 10; Barnett, OH 710, 27-29. See Harden, OH 728, 12.

<sup>31</sup> Foster, OH 706, 9-10. See Kooker, OH 711, 15. See Brock, OH 707,55; Cheek, OH 731, 17-8; Willie Frances McAdams, OH 730, 31-2; Barnett, OH 710, 25. Also see Trudy Foster personal files “Denton Street Map,” and “Property Owners and Street Frontage Graphs,” as well as “Conclusions of 24 Street Survey,” University Archives, Willis Library, University of North Texas, Denton, Texas.



**Detail from Trudy Foster's Poster, "These are the Houses Owned by Elders in Our Church."**

fearing possible eviction, increased rent, or other legal entanglements with their landlords. Many residents took the wait-and-see attitude of Bradshaw Street resident Alonzo Medlock, who was willing "to sign if this is what everyone wants to do." Sherman Byrd, an East Prairie Street resident, would not agree to have his entire front footage paved but from the corner up "only to his gate." Catherine Morgan, who was trying to support five children on forty dollars per week, just wanted the Bradshaw-Sycamore corner and said, "I could pay five dollars per week." Mrs. Greer on Bradshaw Street didn't know the name of her landlord. Mrs. Tom McKinney on Maddox Street thought she could "handle three dollars per month." Robert Baldrige didn't think the amount of traffic on his street justified the cost of paving. Despite these attitudes and fears which would have left unpaved gaps in many of the streets, the Fellowship had gained sufficient signatures so that paving could begin by 1967.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup>Denton Christian Women's Inter-racial Fellowship, "Survey of Paved and Unpaved Streets, 1968," 7-14.

In the arduous process of convincing property owners and residents to the sign the petitions, Foster's forces went door to door. According to Bessie Harden, "We walked those streets and persuaded the black people to give a few feet of their land so we could get those streets paved. We really...I guess we lobbied (laughter)." Jean Kooker described the street paving drive:

We knocked on the doors of southeast Denton and explained to people and begged and pleaded and twisted arms until we got the needed number of people to sign the agreement that they would do their own curb and guttering. There was money available; the city had also made some money available for people who couldn't afford to pay.

In the first phase of the project, six streets were paved by 1967, utilizing unappropriated city funds and special assessments of property owners and residents. By November, 1970 paving of the remaining eighteen streets was nearing completion and brought additional improvements as well. According to a story in the Denton Record Chronicle in 1970, "Not only does it mean that the dust and potholes are gone, but for the first time he [the Southeast Denton resident] may have water and sewer facilities for his home." By this time all homes there at last had electricity and the connections were provided at the expense of the Denton Utilities Department. The existing water and sewer lines along the streets of southeast Denton were improved and enlarged. Moreover, the city modified the assessment rules for this project so that property owners on each side of the street had to pay only one-fourth, as opposed to one-third the cost, while the city share rose from one third to one-half. The city also agreed to extend the time limit on paying the assessment from three to five years and with no interest charges, as well as to eliminate the necessity for having to have a majority of the property owners sign a petition requesting that the city pave the individual streets. The cost to the city for completion of the final project was \$606,211.00. In describing the success of the street paving project, Bessie Harden related: "We just stayed on them all the time with the help of those white women. That's what got it done. Those white women helped us get it done."<sup>33</sup>

The survey of unpaved streets was only part of a broader "good neighbor" program that included promotion of open housing and urban renewal for deteriorated areas of the city. But efforts to go

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<sup>33</sup> "Cooperation: 2 Way Street: Denton Citizens Pave Way to Progress," *Denton Record Chronicle*, 29 November 1970, 6A. See Harden, OH 728, 12.

forward with urban renewal under federal government auspices did not fare well. The effort caused even deeper division among blacks, some of whom feared they would lose all or part of their land, and among whites in the community as well as within the Fellowship who feared expanding government and higher taxes. Urban renewal became so divisive an issue that it was dropped as a group project. In the 1966 municipal election, urban renewal was rejected by a vote of five to one. The 3,600 votes were “the largest number of votes ever cast in a municipal election in Denton” to that time. Members of the Fellowship maintained that the black and white “No” forces, led by the white editor of a local newspaper, capitalized upon the black fears about losing their property, as illustrated by one widely circulated election flyer:

1. Will you vote your neighbor out of his home? Do you want him to vote you out of yours? If you approve urban renewal, a few appointed officials could vote you both out.

2. You can lose your home under urban renewal...Let no one tell you than you cannot. *The home you save may be your own.*

...

5. Our dynamic city will become their federal city! Once urban renewal is voted all programs must be approved by the federal government, no matter what Denton citizens want.

...

7. Once urban renewal is voted, it can be extended to any part of Denton by majority vote of the city council. No vote is required after the first election. You will vote away your right to the protection of the ballot box.

...

9. Contrary to what many people believe, urban renewal does not build a single house. It is a clearance and rehabilitation program only. You must pay cash or borrow money at low interest rates to build the house.<sup>34</sup>

One last Fellowship project—focused on jobs—had results difficult to assess. Throughout the period 1964-1970, the group conducted a series of seminars on job seeking techniques and résumé writing. The women also set up job fairs, and interviews, held in conjunction with the group’s regular meetings, between job-seeking

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<sup>34</sup>Harden, OH 728, 15-8; Cheek, OH 731, 22-4; Kooker, OH 711, 16-7; Brock, OH 707, 51-2. See Mohair, OH 713, 25. Also see Jim Barlow, “Urban Renewal Rejected 5 to 1: 3600 People Cast Votes In Election,” *Denton Record Chronicle*, 16 July 1966, 25. See “Urban Renewal Vote Draws Largest Turnout In Denton,” *Denton Record Chronicle*, 17 July 1966, 1. See Trudy Foster, personal files, “Federal Renewal in Denton,” University Archives, Willis Library, University of North Texas, Denton, Texas.

Fellowship members and prospective area employers. They also attempted to exert some direct economic pressure on employers: the group's approximately sixty women made purchasing decisions and paid their monthly bills with an eye to improving employment opportunities—for paying bills or communicating with merchants, they prepared and religiously affixed small return address stickers that read: "As Your Customer I Welcome Being Served By Any Qualified Person Regardless Of Race, Creed, Or Color."<sup>35</sup> It is hard to assess the results of such programs, but progress seemed visible to members: the Fellowship rejoiced when Linnie McAdams broke out of the customary black domestic or food service employment regimen by obtaining clerical employment first with Moore Business Forms, a major employer in Denton, and later with the Social Security Administration. Others followed into the professions after completing various degree or other educational programs.<sup>35</sup>

After nearly a decade of activity, by the early 1970s the Fellowship had ceased to be an active organization. Members had grown older; children—the original bonding agents—were grown and many had left Denton, leaving little new blood for the Fellowship; and most important, the specific goals had been achieved. Former members are insistent that the organization had succeeded in its own terms; they deny that it had been overtaken by a more militant civil rights movement, black separatism, or the radical feminism of the 1970's. Even accepting such a judgment, however, leaves open the question of how to interpret the significance of such efforts in a broader historical context.

This overview of the activities of the Fellowship lends support to two recent theses that appear, at first, to be mutually exclusive. In his 1987 work *Class, Race and the Civil Rights Movement*, Jack Bloom contended that the challenge to southern racism required a coalition of disparate forces of Southern business and middle classes along with the national Democratic party and the federal government. In the Fellowship one sees a variation on this theme, in which a coalition of women worked to this very end. On the other hand, Herbert H. Haines in his 1988 work, *Black*

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<sup>35</sup>Brock, OH 707, 48; Adkins OH 705, 7-10; Kooker, OH 711, 7; Catherine Bell, "Oral Interview with Catherine Bell," OH 708, 24; McGuire, OH 722, 23; Barnett, OH 710, 12-4. See Trudy Foster, personal files, "Check Stickers," University Archives, Willis Library, University of North Texas, Denton, Texas.

*Radicals and the Civil Rights Mainstream, 1954-1970*, argues that the radical turn of the civil rights movement after 1964 was constructive in the sense that it had the effect of making the aims of moderate activists seem more readily acceptable to those frightened by the extremes of radicals.<sup>36</sup> This conclusion, too, seems consistent with the experience of the Women's Inter-racial Fellowship in Denton.

Though overlooked by the media and previously unknown to students, this group—and perhaps others like it elsewhere in the South—had a significant impact in improving local race relations. While the national media concentrated on dramatic marches, conflicts, and struggles over legislation, most of them dominated by images of male activism, and while local officials were hamstrung by inflexible rules in the City Council, the white and black church women of Denton went to work to make progress in race relations a reality. They demonstrated, in the process, that an unheralded effort at cooperation could produce a tangible measure of lasting improvement in the lives of blacks and whites in their city. This is the legacy of the Denton Christian Women's Inter-racial Fellowship, whose history suggests some broader themes and questions about the history of the civil rights movement far beyond one small Texas community.

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<sup>36</sup>Jack Bloom, *Class, Race and The Civil Rights Movement* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 1-5. Also see Haines, *Black Radicals and the Civil Rights Mainstream, 1954-1970* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 167-171.