

making SPACE

Part 4: Paving the Way for Equity and Equality by Chasity Gunn

Abolitionist and lecturer Frederick Douglass said: "If there is no struggle, there is no progress." African Americans in Elgin experienced many struggles and barriers to being treated as equal citizens of the community. The early 20th century was a turbulent time for race relations throughout the nation. Multiple cities experienced racial violence, and the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) experienced a resurgence. Elgin was no exception to this national trend.

In 1921, the KKK sent 16-year-old Preston Johnson a letter warning him to leave Elgin within eight hours of receiving the letter. He was accused of fathering a child born by a White girl from Dundee. The girl nor her family had filed any complaint against Johnson to local authorities.

On Sunday night, October 23, a mob of about 50 White men and boys acted as vigilantes. The KKK members kidnapped Johnson, took him to an area west of Wing Park, stripped him of his clothing, and rolled his young body in tars and feathers. The act of racial violence was described as a "party."

The KKK threatened to kill Johnson if he revealed the identity of his attackers, who got in their cars and drove away. Johnson's family and other members of The Settlement community contacted local authorities and requested that action be taken. Elgin police took no action. Eventually, the state attorney's office indicted 19 men, and 16 were found guilty. The grand jury's report indicated that Johnson was of good character, and there was no basis for the rumor that he had fathered the child.

This was one of many incidents involving the KKK that occurred in Elgin. Despite the oppression and opposition, Elgin's African Americans continued to rise and progress. In the 1940s, the swimming pool at Wing Park was integrated. Flynn Robinson, a 1959 graduate of Elgin High School, was an all-American at the University of Wyoming. He played in the National Basketball Association (NBA) and was voted Milwaukee's most popular player.

Between 1950 and 1960, Elgin's African American population nearly doubled. This growth was an outpouring of the Great Migration, a 60-year period of a mass exodus of African Americans from the South to the Midwest, Western, and Northern states. They were leaving the South to escape racial terror, oppressive Jim Crow laws, and to pursue economic and educational opportunities. Many of the new arrivals were forced to live on the northeast side of town or in a trailer park community that had once been swamp land. It was on the south side of Laurel Street adjacent to Willard Avenue.

Elgin's African Americans battled housing discrimination for many decades. As they slowly integrated various communities through Elgin, many began to break leadership and

employment barriers. In 1955, Griffin H. Cockrell was hired as a city clerk. In 1963, Melvin Copeland was hired as the first African American professional for U-46. In 1968, Larry Daly was hired as the first African American police officer.

In 1969, Levi Lathen was elected to the board of education. In 1970, Ronald O'Neal was the district's first African American principal. He was the principal of Sheridan Elementary, then Larsen Middle, and Elgin High School. Now, an elementary school bears his namesake.

In 1973, Bob Gilliam, a school administrator, was the first African American elected to the City Council in 1973. He was re-elected in 1977, 1981, 1985, 1989, and 1993. He served longer than any mayor, alderman, commissioner, or council member in the city's history. In September 2014, Elgin renamed its municipal complex in his honor.

A Texas native, Floyd Brown, broke many barriers in the media. He was an engineer at Elgin's WRMN radio station in 1951. He was the first African American to sign with NBC and WMAQ. From 1971 to 1999, he was a sportscaster for WGN and the host of "The Floyd Brown Show" for nearly 30 years.

His wife, Betty Brown, is a pioneer in her own right. In the 1950s, she was denied access to the nursing school of Advocate Sherman Hospital, so she pursued training at a school in Joliet. Years later, she was hired at Sherman. In 2022, the hospital named her an honorary chief nursing officer.

In 2021, the City of Elgin proclaimed July 30th as Ernest "Ernie" Broadnax Day. The son of the late Daniel Broadnax, Ernie has remained a life-long resident committed to sharing the history of Elgin's African Americans. Broadnax was also Elgin Community College's first African American basketball player. He produced a documentary, "Project 2-3-1: Two Boxcars, Three Blocks, One City: A Story of Elgin's African American Heritage," in 2015. This documentary speaks to the rugged mountains that Elgin's African Americans climbed to reach the pinnacle of today's progress and success. Although a great deal of work regarding equality, equity and representation still remains, Elgin's future rests firmly and proudly on the shoulders of its African American forefathers and foremothers.