
Emma Lou Thornbrough: Mentor and Teacher

*Richard B. Pierce, II**

It was at the Indiana Association of History conference a year or so ago that I first met Emma Lou Thornbrough. As a graduate student studying the African-American community in Indianapolis, I had gone to the conference hoping to ask Professor Thornbrough a question or two. I rehearsed what I would say to her, and by the day of the conference I felt fairly confident that I would not appear to be a stuttering admirer. All my preparations were for naught, for as I rounded the corner leading to the main ballroom I found myself face-to-face with the Thornbrough sisters. I began my soliloquy, stuttering despite my rehearsed speech. I fear I made no logical sense. Professor Thornbrough cut me short, thankfully, and told me to make an appointment to visit her at home where we could talk. It seemed to me that I should write my questions before the visit.

What followed was an example of the "old school" practice where the student sat at the foot of the teacher and listened. I was not one of Professor Thornbrough's students. She was not on my dissertation committee, nor was she an informal reader. I was a graduate student who sought her out, and she responded by sharing with me her insight on Indianapolis. Again, all of my questions seemed inadequate. I had written them this time, but as the conversation spun, it seemed as if I were in a classroom taking notes. Without benefit of reference materials or notes Professor Thornbrough told me of Indianapolis's chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the consequences of housing restrictions, and the efforts to construct and then demolish school segregation in the Hoosier capital. On the last point her help was most appreciated. It was at that meeting that I learned that Professor Thornbrough had written a lengthy treatise on the Indianapolis school desegregation process. She told me, quite firmly, to locate the work at the Indiana Historical Society (IHS) and read it thoroughly. I left her home and went directly to the IHS.

For the next two weeks I was the favored child of the IHS staff. Instead of going to the reference desk with repeated requests for

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additional materials, I asked for one item in the morning and gave that same item back to them at the end of the day. I heard their whispered conversations when the desk staff was relieved, "There's Pierce. He still has Thornbrough's manuscript." *The Indianapolis Story*, as she had titled her work, was a treasure. Thornbrough had moiled through the tedious Indianapolis School Board minutes, newspaper accounts, and municipal court transcripts to produce a meticulous account of the Indianapolis school policy regarding race. It is a substantial work and a lasting testament to the length and breadth of her career. She had given the manuscript to the IHS in 1992, and it showed that despite her retirement, Thornbrough remained an active scholar.

All of us who work on Indiana history owe a debt of gratitude to Professor Thornbrough. She worked in a field that was not at the time she began her career popular among historians, and she produced work that has lasting merit. Before meeting her I had often silently offered my gratefulness. In person I offered it again. Now, thanks to this special issue of the *Indiana Magazine of History*, I put my indebtedness in print.