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## “A Sturdy Core of Thinking, Fact Seeking Citizens”: The Open Forum Movement and Public Learning in Terre Haute and Hammond, Indiana, in the 1920s

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In Sinclair Lewis’s fictional Zenith, Ohio, in 1920, George Babbitt complained to his wife that their daughter and her beau were “trudging off to lectures by authors and Hindu philosophers and Swedish lieutenants.” Lewis was describing an actual phenomenon taking place in several hundred industrial cities, including at least four in Indiana. The Open Forum lecture movement was remarkable: a locally planned, non-partisan, non-sectarian initiative in public learning, reaching thousands of people around the country. Expanding beyond the Chautauqua lecture movement in topics and locale, it brought a wide range of people together to discuss the vital concerns and intellectual advances of the day and to consider the core beliefs and values in their lives.<sup>1</sup>

Although the Open Forum has faded from history, it was a model of social commitment, public learning, and freedom of speech that took root not only in metropolitan areas but also in small cities in the Midwest. The story of the movement in Terre Haute and Hammond in the 1920s provides fresh insight into Indiana’s history, revealing a previously unknown interest in the ideas of liberal reformers and support for public learning, and documenting the social activism of a minister and rabbi. It also suggests that other smaller urban communities of the Midwest were less provincial and more politically varied than most accounts of the era suggest.

The Open Forum is best understood in both religious and political terms. Inspired by the Social Gospel vision to “re-order” society, it sought to bridge differences of class, race, and ethnicity. The congregations and civic groups that sponsored Open Forums brought a wide

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<sup>1</sup>Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt* (New York, 1922), 230-31. The national Open Forum movement is not included in standard works on the Progressive Era, Social Gospel, or public learning. For example, Kevin Mattson sets Ford Hall Forum, where the movement began in Boston in 1908, in the civic context of public lectures but does not look beyond the city; Kevin Mattson, *Creating a Democratic Public: The Struggle for Urban Participatory Democracy During the Progressive Era* (University Park, Penn., 1998), 41-47. See also Paula M. Kane, *Separatism and Subculture: Boston Catholicism, 1900-1920* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1994), 22-38; Arthur S. Meyers, “A Bridge to the Future: From the Boston Baptist Social Union to the Beth El Open Forum,” *American Baptist Quarterly*, XIV (September 1995), 225-40.

range of new ideas to the public, creating learning opportunities and deliberative democracy outside of traditional settings. When the movement spread to Indiana during the post-World War I era, its leaders worked to overcome the increasingly prevalent religious apathy and political conservatism of the period.<sup>2</sup>

George W. Coleman, a Baptist lay leader in Boston, founded the movement in 1908. Combining his strong commitment to the Social Gospel and democratic discussion with great advertising skill, he quickly spread the model from Ford Hall in Boston into New England. Through enthusiastic writings in an array of publications and hundreds of speeches, he carried the message to the nation. In 1920, the Open Forum came to Indiana.<sup>3</sup>

The Hoosier state at the time hardly seemed fertile ground for a movement devoted to an open platform that often included liberal values. The state's largely native-born, Protestant population avoided extremes and held strongly to past traditions. The period saw a hardening pattern of residential segregation based on race, a declining percentage of foreign-born residents, and sedition laws intended to stifle radical voices. A growing urban and declining rural population, however, produced new tensions and conflicts. The state's economy had become increasingly industrial, and, though unions were weak, labor disturbances were frequent. Many Hoosiers threatened by these changes joined the Ku Klux Klan. The organization was strongest in areas most affected by industrial development, but in small towns and rural areas, too, many farmers as well as "merchants, small businessmen, and Protestant ministers donned the white robe and hood." One Indiana Klanswoman recalled that "everyone was in the Klan," but there were, of course, many native-born white Protestants who did not join, and the movement, by definition, shut out Hoosiers who were Catholic, Jewish, or African American. This exclusion

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<sup>2</sup>Robert T. Handy, "The American Religious Depression, 1924-1935," *Church History*, XXIX (March 1960), 13; Harold E. Stearns, ed., *Civilization in the United States; An Inquiry By Thirty Americans* (New York, 1922; reprint, Westport, Conn., 1971), v-vii; Walter Lippmann, "The Causes of Political Indifference To-day," *Atlantic Monthly* (February 1927), 263; John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* (New York, 1927; reprint, Denver, Colo., 1964), 166-218; Arthur S. Meyers, "'The Striking of Mind Upon Mind': The Open Forum and the Social Gospel," *Baptist History and Heritage*, XXXV (Spring 2000), 20-36.

<sup>3</sup>"Report of President to Annual Meeting of Open Forum National Council," Chautauqua, New York, August 21, 1920, Ford Hall Forum Papers (Boston Public Library); George W. Coleman Alpha File, Ford Hall Forum Scrapbooks, Open Forum Movement, #6 (1916-1918) (American Baptist-Samuel Colgate Historical Library, American Baptist Historical Society, Rochester, New York). The Ford Hall Forum and Open Forum Scrapbooks held in Rochester, New York, as noted above, date from 1908 until 1927 in nine volumes. Program brochures of the Hammond series begin with "Beth-El Social Center Open Forum Course, First Season Program, 1924-1925," and continue, with some name changes, through 1943. Subsequent references to these three sets of papers will be designated as Forum Papers, Rochester; Forum Papers, Boston; and Forum Papers, Hammond.

created moments of irony, as when a Jewish merchant in Terre Haute recognized some parading Klan members by the shoes they had purchased from his store.<sup>4</sup>

The Open Forum movement nevertheless made headway in Indiana. A list of states where Forum series were held in 1926 showed more than forty cities and towns in the Midwest, including two in Indiana, most likely Terre Haute and Hammond. Indianapolis began a series that year with "Open Forum" in the title, and Evansville adopted the model, with a different title, a year later. Other lecture series were held in the state, just before and after the war, for brief periods, but the Forums remained popular. A woman who attended the Hammond programs during the 1930s looked back more than fifty years later at "the most marvelous program that ever existed."<sup>5</sup>

Terre Haute seemed in some ways an unlikely setting for a Forum series. The city of 66,000, in the west-central part of the state, had a largely native-born white population and was emerging from a difficult period in which labor militancy, machine politics, corruption, and constant investigations had shaped the city's image. A bitter 1902 street railway strike and boycott was followed in the 1910s by larger, longer, more militant strikes. Civic corruption was rampant, with 116 officials, including the Mayor, found guilty of various offenses. An Indianapolis newspaper described Terre Haute's politics as "a corrupt and rotten system," one that was bringing the city "to the verge of anarchy."<sup>6</sup>

But Terre Haute also had, in the words of one community archivist, "a rich history of radical thought juxtaposed with more mainstream conservative business influences." The city had a long history of clubs established for the "improvement of the mind and

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<sup>4</sup>Clifton J. Phillips, *Indiana in Transition: The Emergence of an Industrial Commonwealth, 1880-1920* (Indianapolis, 1968), 127, 323-442; James H. Madison, *Indiana Through Tradition and Change: A History of the Hoosier State and Its People, 1920-1945* (Indianapolis, 1982), 6-57, quote p. 45; Leonard J. Moore, *Citizen Klansmen: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921-1928* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1991), 49-83; Kathleen M. Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley, Calif., 1991), 167-68; Sid Levin, oral history, transcript, June 16, 1981 (Community Archives, Vigo County Public Library, Terre Haute, Indiana); Max R. Einstandig, letter to author, Terre Haute, Indiana, September 5, 2001.

<sup>5</sup>Nathaniel Peffer, *New Schools For Older Students* (New York, 1926), 11; Jewish Community Center Records, M 349, and Jewish Welfare Federation of Indianapolis Papers, M 463 (Manuscript Collection, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis); Historic Clipping File, Washington Avenue Temple Men's Club Lectures (Evansville-Vanderburgh County Public Library, Evansville, Indiana); Rosalyn Friedman, interview by author, Calumet City, Illinois, May 30, 1992.

<sup>6</sup>"U.S.—Population of Places of 3,000 or More Inhabitants," *The World Almanac and Book of Facts, 1932* (New York, 1932), 408; Gary L. Bailey, "Losing Ground; Workers and Community in Terre Haute, Indiana, 1875-1935," (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, Bloomington, 1989), 335-495; "Terre Haute's Jailed Government," *Literary Digest*, January 16, 1915, 87-88; "Fear of God in Terre Haute," *ibid.*, April 24, 1915, 943-44; "In the Indiana Belfry," *ibid.*, July 3, 1915, 6.



DOWNTOWN TERRE HAUTE, 1920

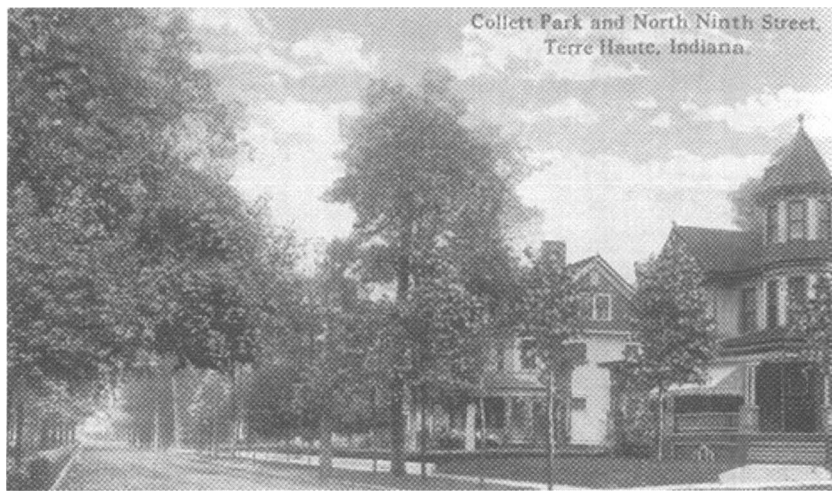
self.” Although some of the clubs in the 1920s supported mainstream thought, others embraced innovation and Progressive-era reforms.<sup>7</sup>

In 1920, a young clergyman came to the city. John W. Herring, son of a national leader of the Congregational church, had graduated from Oberlin College in 1914. Important figures in the Social Gospel movement, including Walter Rauschenbusch, frequently visited the campus while Herring was a student and probably shaped his thinking on social issues. From 1914 to 1918, he attended Chicago Theological Seminary, which taught a liberal Christian sociology and emphasized social action. From this background, Herring came to Terre Haute’s First Congregational Church and began an Open Forum.<sup>8</sup>

When Coleman, the founder of the Forum movement, spoke at the inaugural program in Terre Haute, a crowd of 500 people greeted him. Coleman’s report of the session noted that people from different social classes had attended: “Business and professional men, toilers in shops and factories, men and women from stores and offices and school room.” Labor leaders were on hand for any signs of “enmity,”

<sup>7</sup>Susan Dehler, Archivist, Community Archives, Vigo County Public Library, letter to author, Terre Haute, Indiana, August 28, 2001.

<sup>8</sup>John W. Herring File, Henry Churchill King Papers (Oberlin College Archives, Oberlin, Ohio); Roland Baumann, College Archivist, Oberlin College, letter to author, Oberlin, Ohio, November 19, 1997; Donald M. Love, *Henry Churchill King of Oberlin* (New Haven, Conn., 1956), 153-56; Joan Blocker, Assistant Librarian, Chicago Theological Seminary, letter to author, Chicago, Illinois, October 30, 1997; Harold F. Worthley, Executive Secretary and Archivist, Congregational Christian Historical Society, letter to author, Boston, Massachusetts, October 11, 1997; Arthur C. McGiffert, Jr., *No Ivory Tower; The Story of the Chicago Theological Seminary* (Chicago, 1965), 92-103.



COLLETT PARK NEIGHBORHOOD, TERRE HAUTE, 1912

while others wondered if the program was “a menace in disguise.” But Coleman rejoiced that “[E]very element in the city is co-operating,” and described the series as “a beacon light” for the surrounding area. The local newspaper hailed the Forum’s “auspicious opening.”<sup>9</sup>

A “community non-sectarian committee,” reflecting the city’s religious, educational, business, and union leadership, planned the series. Although the Forum was held on Sunday evenings, the intent was not to “injure church services.” The schedule was primarily for people without a “Sunday evening home” to attend. The organization promised that it drew “no sectarian [or] race lines,” had “no axe to grind,” and would steer clear of politics and sectarian religion. Herring’s words echoed those of Coleman, when he had reassured Boston ministers that he was not seeking their congregants.<sup>10</sup>

The Forum’s “Rules for Open Discussion” were emphatic. They called for “Questions—not Speeches [and] Principles—not Personalities.” Organizers insisted on “A Question from each—not a Catechism by a Few” and they placed “A strict Taboo on anything that savours of Propaganda.” Finally, they demanded “Honesty of speeches and honesty of questions.” Herring described the principles of the movement and its implementation: it “extracted [men and women] from their

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<sup>9</sup>Terre Haute *Tribune*, November 15, 1920; *Detroit Open Forum; A Journal of News and Views*, December 6, 1920, 7; Forum Papers, Rochester; George W. Coleman, “The Forum Marching On,” *The Congregationalist and Advance*, December 23, 1920, 819.

<sup>10</sup>*The Open Forum News Service* (Terre Haute, 1920–1921 Season), Forum Papers, Rochester; Terre Haute *Tribune*, January 16, October 23, 28, 1921; Susan Dehler, letter to author, September 17, 1997; *The Open Forum* (Boston, July 1921), p. 7, Forum Papers, Rochester.



JOHN W. HERRING, FOUNDER OF THE  
TERRE HAUTE OPEN FORUM

Courtesy: Oberlin College Archives

compartments and, by means of free discussion, brought [them] into vital relationship with one another." Through the Forum, a widely diverse group of people, with varying opinions and interests, would acquire an intelligent and constructive social will. The question period following the talk, he wrote, was "the striking of mind upon mind, the airing of misunderstandings, challenges as to facts involved, questions that draw out and clarify the speaker's message, the pouring of every kind of a reaction from every class into the melting pot toward the end of a fairer and better considered outlook by all."<sup>11</sup>

The link between unions and the Forum, particularly in Terre Haute with its strong labor presence, provides evidence of the lecture movement's broad, cross-class base. The secretary of Boston's Central

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<sup>11</sup>John C. Herring, "The Open Forum," *Adult Bible Class Monthly*, XV (November 1922), 321-22, 325.

Labor Union was one of the planners of the Ford Hall Forum and was the first speaker at its opening night. As William A. Brown, a leader in progressive Christianity, wrote in 1922, the movement was an attempt "to bridge the gap between the Church and organized labor."<sup>12</sup>

In this and other efforts to broaden their constituency, Terre Haute forum leaders apparently succeeded. Newspaper accounts of the first year's programs frequently mention capacity audiences. The extensive range of lecture topics for that year included city planning, prison reform, labor-management relations, marriage, the farm crisis, civil liberties, foreign affairs, and local political issues. This varied schedule represented a carefully planned approach to broaden the knowledge and social awareness of the city's adults. In announcing plans for the second year, the speakers' committee claimed that it had made "a careful and conscientious effort to maintain an even balance of radical and conservative presentations" and the committee members reiterated their belief that "truth will eventually come out through free discussion."<sup>13</sup>

Several speakers at the Terre Haute forums explored ethnic and racial issues. Sociologist Edward Steiner lectured early in the second season. In researching his book, *On the Trail of the Immigrant* (1906), he had made many trips across the Atlantic, always in steerage, to understand the spirit and problems of immigrants. Before a filled hall, he declared that the postwar world was suffering from a "perverted nationalism." Self-determination had become "selfish determination." Everywhere in Europe he found destruction resulting from the war, with the greatest damage not to individuals but to the human spirit. Steiner was typical of many lecturers who brought first-hand knowledge of foreign affairs to the Forum. Another major speaker was W. E. B. DuBois, author and editor of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's widely read monthly, *The Crisis*. His speech on global prospects for change after the World War, entitled "The Future of the Darker Races," was the same topic he would address later in Hammond. The scholar-activist predicted little danger of these races dying out or being exterminated, as they composed by far the greater part of the world's population.<sup>14</sup>

The Terre Haute Open Forum was off to a strong start. In the conservative postwar era, an ideal series had been developed, with

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<sup>12</sup>Capacity attendance is noted, for example, in the *Terre Haute Tribune*, November 15, December 6, 1920; January 10, 1921. The link between labor and the Forum is described in William Adams Brown, *The Church in America: A Study of The Present Condition and Future Prospects of American Protestantism* (New York, 1922), 90.

<sup>13</sup>*Terre Haute Tribune*, October 23, 1921.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, December 12, 1921; January 30, 1922. Although a copy of Du Bois's lecture with that title was not located, news reports of his presentation in other cities are in the [Hammond] *Lake County Times*, February 24, 1926, and *Detroit News*, February 8, 1926.

a representative planning committee, a range of topics of local and wider interest, and speakers who broadened horizons and sparked controversy. Despite the modern perception of 1920s Indiana as narrow-minded and Klan-dominated, large audiences in the first two years attest to the public's interest, while extended coverage by the leading local newspaper confirms the Forum's importance for the community. The open platform and vigorous give-and-take question periods built bridges of understanding among different religious and ethnic groups, as well as between labor and business.

Some Forum leaders went further and publicly challenged the worst aspects of midwestern bigotry and racism. In September 1924 Herring directly confronted the issue before a meeting of the anti-Klan "Protestant Committee of One Hundred of Parke County," near Terre Haute. A local newspaper noted that while "the Klan is strong, and Catholics are few" in the area, there was "an intensely bitter feeling between the Klan and anti-Klan Protestants." The minister began by saying it would be easy to condemn the Klan but that it was more important to approach the problem without rancor, "as brothers in a democracy." He called for the Klan members in the audience to come out in the open, claiming that "a good old-fashioned honest town meeting" would clear up misunderstanding. No one, he asserted, would be happier than the people at the meeting to see law enforcement, civic honesty, and patriotism put into effect. Rather than hiding behind masks in a mob at night, he urged Klan members to lay their arguments before the court of public opinion in broad daylight. He concluded that he might be "a red Russian or a pink alien," but that he had been taught from the cradle to believe that true Americanism included belief in freedom and equal opportunity for all.<sup>15</sup>

The vice-chairman of the Forum, Rabbi Joseph Fink of Temple Israel, showed even greater personal courage. In 1923, the local Klan group ordered the Reform rabbi to resign as president of the Welfare League, the predecessor to the United Way. He refused, and they invited him to a meeting on a deserted farm. Before 300 hooded Klan members, he derided the cowardice of those who concealed their identities under the guise of Americanism. A few days later, the group sent the Welfare League a check for \$1,800.<sup>16</sup>

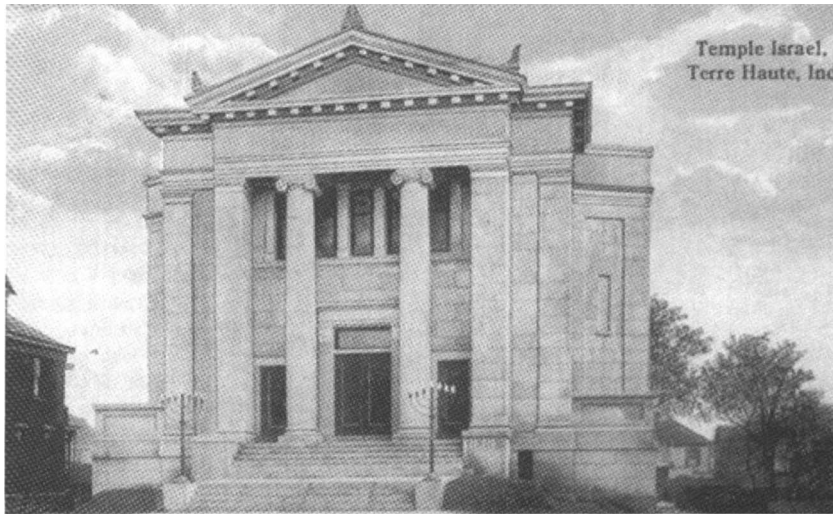
The Open Forum also challenged the prevailing political conservatism of 1920s Indiana. In the 1924 election, Ed Jackson, the Klan-backed gubernatorial candidate, swept the state, and a majority of Klan-supported candidates won the legislature. Speaking shortly after the vote at the Terre Haute Forum, Roger Baldwin, National

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<sup>15</sup>Terre Haute *Tribune*, September 20, 1924; Rockville *Tribune*, September 17, 24, October 1, 1924; Rockville *Republican*, September 24, 1924.

<sup>16</sup>25th Anniversary Program Booklet, Temple Beth Zion, Buffalo, New York, 1949, Nearprint Box - Biographies, "Joseph L. Fink," (American Jewish Archives, Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, Ohio); Kathy Spray, American Jewish Archives, letter to author, Cincinnati, Ohio, January 21, 1998.





TEMPLE ISRAEL, TERRE HAUTE.

Director of the American Civil Liberties Union, expressed hope that in spite of the conservative victory, the state's civil liberties climate would improve. On Armistice Day Baldwin, a World War I conscientious objector, spoke at the Forum, prompting criticism from the local American Legion post. In the following weeks, a female minister discussed women in politics, and a sociology professor spoke on race prejudice from a global perspective.<sup>17</sup>

From 1923 to 1924, Herring also served with the Midwest Council for Social Discussion in Chicago. Part of the Open Forum movement, the Council brought together adult education groups across the Midwest. In October 1924, the minister resigned his pulpit for a position with the Federal Council of Churches. Socialist leader and Terre Haute resident Eugene V. Debs wrote that Herring was "the most progressive preacher we have had here for years." Herring eventually left the ministry to work full time in bringing communities together and to spread the Forum approach to adult education. His departure marked the end of the Terre Haute Forum, but even as this series was concluding, another was beginning in a different house of worship in the northwestern corner of the state.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>*Lake County Times*, November 5, 1924; James H. Madison, *The Indiana Way* (Bloomington, 1986), 293; Dennis Vetrovec, Cunningham Memorial Library, Indiana State University Library, letter to author, Terre Haute, Indiana, November 21, 1997, with copy of letter enclosed from Roger Baldwin, Director, American Civil Liberties Union, New York, New York, to V. R. McMillan, Commander, Fort Harrison Post No. 40, American Legion, Terre Haute, Indiana, January 17, 1925; *Terre Haute Tribune*, November 9, 12, 19, 26, 1924.

<sup>18</sup>Herring File, Henry Churchill King Papers; *Terre Haute Tribune*, October 3, 1924; "The First Birthday of the Midwest Council For Social Discussion," n.d., Forum Papers, Rochester; Eugene V. Debs, *Letters of Eugene V. Debs*, Vol. III: 1919-1926,



STATE STREET, HAMMOND, INDIANA, 1927

Courtesy: Chicago Daily News Negatives Collection, Chicago Historical Society

When newly ordained Rabbi Max Bretton came to Hammond in 1923, he found a growing industrial community. A population of 20,000 in 1910 had grown to 36,000 in 1920 and would expand to 64,000 by the end of the decade. In 1920, 8,000 residents were foreign-born, mostly from Poland, Germany and Austria. In the same year, 168 people of "Negro and other races" were listed; by 1930 this number would rise to 715. The Chamber of Commerce increased its membership within a few years from 300 to 700 members, and conveyed its goal graphically: "The Map Shows Why Hammond Grows." New construction and new businesses, a large planned residential addition, and the growth of existing industries all meant greater opportunities. While the city's Jewish population was small, as in Terre Haute, Jews were extensively involved in local commercial life and civic activities. The rabbi gave a "well-received" speech at a Chamber meeting on city development, speaking not only about industry but also the establishment of parks and playgrounds and the "artistic possibilities" of Hammond's citizens.<sup>19</sup>

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ed. J. Robert Constantine (Urbana, Ill., 1990), 447; Harold F. Brigham, "Nashville Educational Council," *Journal of Adult Education*, II (June 1930), 324-25; Harold F. Worthley, Executive Secretary and Archivist, Congregational Christian Historical Society, letter to author, Boston, Massachusetts, September 16, 1997; John W. Herring, *Social Planning and Adult Education* (New York, 1933), v-xi, 15-25; John W. Herring and Leo T. Osmon, *Forums and a Community Forum Program* (New York, 1936).

<sup>19</sup>Deborah Bretton Granoff, telephone interview by author, Kansas City, Missouri, May 13, 1991; *Smith's Directory of Hammond, Indiana and West Hammond, Indiana, 1921-22* (Dorchester, Mass., 1922), 14, 32, and *Smith's Directory . . . 1923-24*, 43; *World Almanac and Book of Facts 1932*, 408; Jacob R. Marcus, *To Count a People*:

There was, however, another side to Hammond during those years, as shown in the 1924 "New Year Wish" of the Chamber of Commerce. After listing positive aspects of the community, the Chamber observed that Hammond needed "citizenship, not partisanship; friendliness, not offishness; sympathy not criticism; intelligent support, not indifference." During the 1920s and 1930s, the city had witnessed several instances of Klan activity, and the rabbi spoke of a cross burning on the temple grounds. In 1922, 12,000 to 15,000 people attended a local Klan rally. Although many may have been from adjoining cities, Hammond was the focal point. In 1923, "more than 5000 regalia-clad Klansmen marched" alongside several hundred members wearing their "civilian clothing," and "[s]pectators lined the streets in support." On election night in 1924, when Klan-backed gubernatorial candidate Jackson swept the state, including Hammond, "a cross blazed in every park" in the city.<sup>20</sup>

Bretton brought the liberal idealism of Reform Judaism into this atmosphere. Paralleling the development of the Social Gospel, Reform rabbis were seeking to change Judaism from its emphasis on individual conduct to a focus on social issues. In 1885, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, a Reform group, had stated: "We deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve, on the basis of justice and righteousness, the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society." The rabbis realized that the preachers of the Social Gospel, basing their beliefs on the Prophets, "were now drawing on common values for a common American cause."<sup>21</sup>

The organization's 1918 conference passed the first social justice platform of Reform Judaism. Similar to the 1912 platform of the Federal Council of Churches and the 1919 platform of Catholic bishops, on certain points it went beyond both the Protestant and Catholic positions. The overwork of women, child labor, bad housing, and political corruption were assessed as religious problems. The platform's "[e]ssential, unassailable propositions" included the regulation of wages and work, the entitlement of labor to a voice in its affairs and

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*American Jewish Population Data, 1585-1984* (Lanham, Md., 1988), 65, 68; [Hammond Chamber of Commerce] *Pep-In-Calumet*, December 29, 1924, 1; Alexander Morris, interview by author, Hammond, Indiana, February 8, 1991; Sylvia Friedman, interview by author, Munster, Indiana, April 3, 1991; Ida and Arthur Friedman, interview by author, Munster, Indiana, April 9, 1991.

<sup>20</sup>*Pep-In-Calumet*, December 29, 1924, 1; Granoff, interview by author; Hammond *Times*, July 20, 1984; Neil Betten, "Nativism and the Klan in Town and City: Valparaiso and Gary, Indiana," *Studies in History and Society*, IV (Spring 1973), 6; *Lake County Times*, November 5, 1924.

<sup>21</sup>Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York, 1988), 269, 272, 287-88, 388; Leonard Judah Mervis, "The Social Justice Movement of the American Reform Rabbis, 1890-1940" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1951), 9.

to arbitration in disputes, and the requirement that contracts between employers and employees be endorsed by society.<sup>22</sup>

Like the Social Gospel leaders, the rabbis were confident that an enlightened citizenry could solve the nation's social problems. However, the rabbis' beliefs did not predominate, either within the Central Conference of American Rabbis or the wider Jewish community. Like their Protestant counterparts, progressive rabbis were frequently out of step with their congregational leaders, often businessmen.<sup>23</sup>

At a 1915 conference, Rabbi Abraham Cronbach had argued that social justice was Jewish and right, and right must be done. To the dismay of leaders in the congregations he served, he spoke out vigorously on social problems. Rejected as a pulpit rabbi, in 1922 he became the first Professor of Jewish Social Studies at Hebrew Union College. Among his students was Lithuanian-born Max Bretton, who would shortly assume his first pulpit in Hammond.<sup>24</sup>

When Rabbi Bretton arrived in Hammond, he understood that his most important role would be to teach and raise thought-provoking questions, not simply to guide congregants through rituals. On June 24, 1924, he wrote to New York's Rabbi Stephen Wise, who had served as first vice-president of the Open Forum National Council, and was a leading Jewish voice on social justice and a strong advocate for building bridges between religions: "We are preparing an open forum course in Hammond, Indiana, which is just a few miles outside of Chicago." Four months later, the local newspaper announced the creation of "an open forum . . . expected to have an educational and liberalizing effect upon the entire community." More than "mere lectures," the Beth-El Social Center Open Forum Course (named after the meeting room in the temple) would have "plenty of time for questions and expression of view."<sup>25</sup>

In 1937, looking back at the beginning of the series, the president of the Hammond Open Forum discussed Bretton's motivation. Dr. Hedwig Stieglitz Kuhn, a physician, wrote that the rabbi believed that there was "a sturdy core of thinking, fact seeking citizens" who craved an authoritative discussion of vital problems. From the start, she noted, the forum was non-sectarian. After being given its basic

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<sup>22</sup>Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 288, 309; Jerrold Goldstein, "Reform Rabbis and the Progressive Movement" (M.A. thesis, University of Minnesota, 1967), 4, 52-59, 87-89; Mervis, "Social Justice Movement of the American Reform Rabbis," 45.

<sup>23</sup>Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform; From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York, 1955), 152-53; Goldstein, "Reform Rabbis," 52-59.

<sup>24</sup>Mervis, "Social Justice Movement of the American Reform Rabbis," 52-53, 181-85; Kathy Spray, letter to author, July 26, 1991; *Hebrew Union College Catalogue, 1924-1925*, Nearprint Box—"Hebrew Union College Materials up to 1950" (American Jewish Archives), 50-51.

<sup>25</sup>Rabbi Max Bretton to Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, June 24, 1924, Stephen S. Wise Papers, Reel 74-33, Box 44, Folder 2, (American Jewish Historical Society, Waltham, Massachusetts); *Lake County Times*, October 20, 1924; *Pep-In-Calumet*, March 1925, 18-21.



RABBI MAX BRETTON, FOUNDER OF THE  
HAMMOND OPEN FORUM

Courtesy: Temple Beth-El, Munster, Indiana

form by the temple leadership, the "Beth-El Open Forum" became the "Hammond Open Forum," with a representative steering committee, including a temple and civic leader (the moderator), a civic-minded Catholic attorney, the "staunchly conservative" Methodist superintendent of schools, a female physician and civic activist (a Forum leader from its inception), and the man who would shortly become secretary of the Chamber of Commerce.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Hedwig S. Kuhn, "Time Again for Open Forum," [Hammond Chamber of Commerce] *Hammond Business*, September 1937, 1; *Polk's Hammond [Indiana] City Directory 1931* (Indianapolis, 1931), 214, 289, 441, 448; *Polk's Hammond City Directory 1935* (Chicago, 1935) 171; Lance Trusty, *Hammond, A Centennial Portrait* (1984; Norfolk, Va., 1990), 26, 45, 71, 152, 180, 197; Suzanne Long, Calumet Room Librarian, Hammond Public Library, letters to author, Hammond, Indiana, December 3, 1997, November 18, 1998, January 10, 13, 1999; Rabbi Ulrick B. Steuer, "History of Congregation Beth-El," *Dedication of Temple Beth-El*, booklet, September 9-11, 1955 (Temple Beth-El Archives, Hammond, Indiana).

The very first lecture demonstrated the nonsectarian, broad-ranging Forum principles in action. Father John A. Ryan, a leading Catholic social justice advocate, spoke on "Industrial Democracy." The program brochure for his talk noted that democracy was based on the idea that every human being is entitled to equal consideration. In his 1925 book, *Industrial Democracy from a Catholic Viewpoint*, Ryan wrote that the concept of "industrial democracy" would give wage earners a greater voice in their workplace. The idea of labor sharing in management rested upon the most fundamental desires and capacities of human nature, according to Ryan, with most people seeking some control over their environment. "There is some directive, initiative, creative capacity in every normal human being," he wrote.<sup>27</sup>

The Hammond planners also chose speakers who stressed the importance of tolerance and understanding of other beliefs. The speaker who followed the Roman Catholic Ryan was Syud Hossain, a journalist and public lecturer from India. Introducing Eastern religions to a largely Christian community was intended to demonstrate that non-majority religions contained meaningful values, an important point for the Jewish congregation arranging the series. A subsequent lecture by historian George L. Scherger covered race prejudice "from the early Roman intolerance of Christianity to the present day Ku Klux Klan." There is no such thing as pure American stock, he reminded the audience, as "America always has been a great melting pot [and we] are all brothers of a great world." Scherger longed to see every American extend a helping hand to newcomers. These were remarkable words, considering the anti-immigrant atmosphere in Indiana and the country at the time.<sup>28</sup>

Other speakers in the first year included leaders in the arts, sciences, and humanities, among them novelist Sherwood Anderson, historian Charles Beard, adult educator Will Durant, Socialist leader Norman Thomas, and Dr. John Haynes Holmes, a nationally known clergyman. One lecturer shared a new understanding of history through research in psychology, anthropology, ethnology, and other sciences. Rabbi Bretton concluded the year by speaking on the issue of nationwide child labor reform.<sup>29</sup>

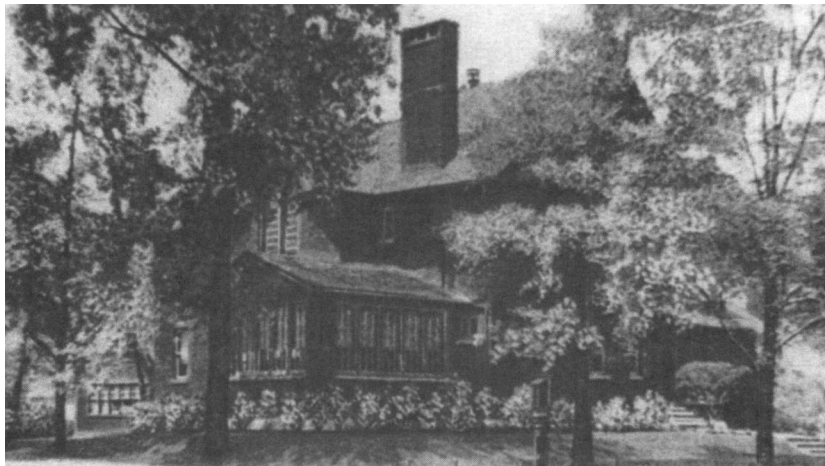
The first year of the Beth-El Open Forum reflected the vision of the planners and laid the groundwork for future programs. To a community that saw Klan hatred and lacked a strong intellectual tradition, Jewish leaders brought Roman Catholic and Indian theologians. They exposed the public to the most current ideas on

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<sup>27</sup>Forum Papers, Hammond; John A. Ryan, *Industrial Democracy from a Catholic Viewpoint* (Washington, D.C., 1925), 1, 7.

<sup>28</sup>Forum Papers, Hammond; "Syud Hossain," *New York Times Obituaries Index, 1858-1968* (New York, 1970), 483; U.S., *Fourteenth Census, 1920: Vol. III, Composition and Characteristics Of The Population By States*, 304; *Lake County Times*, December 3, 1924.

<sup>29</sup>Forum Papers, Hammond.



TEMPLE BETH-EL, HAMMOND, C. 1925

Courtesy: Hammond Public Library

history, science, and literature and did not shy away from controversy. Beard had resigned from Columbia University over the suppression of free speech during the war; Thomas had vigorously opposed America's entry into the war; and Holmes was instrumental in founding the NAACP and ACLU. He had been a leading voice against the war and a strong voice for liberal causes afterwards.<sup>30</sup>

In 1926, after developing a strong foundation for the Forum, Rabbi Bretton left Hammond and the pulpit. In contrast with Terre Haute, the founder's departure did not signal the end of the forums. In the 1930s, foreign affairs became a more frequent topic, eventually dominating the series each year. Lecturers included Rabbi Wise, James Weldon Johnson of the NAACP, and, in 1938, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. One regular attendee from 1930 to 1933 estimated that 100 to 150 people enjoyed the programs during that period. The fact that the series continued for 19 years, Tuesday evenings from late fall until early spring, suggests that the lectures were well-received. Coupled with newspaper articles on the programs, something of the wider educational impact of the Forum can be sensed. The Chamber of Commerce also recognized its value, pointing out the importance of paying attention to the social and esthetic development of citizens. The Forum's value could not be measured in financial terms, the business group noted, but rather in terms of "civic development."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Janet Weiss Pence (daughter of Arthur Weiss, moderator), letter to author, Mill Valley, California, April 3, 1991; *Pep-In-Calumet*, March 1925, 18-21.

<sup>31</sup>*Dictionary of American Biography*, see under "Charles A. Beard" and "John H. Holmes"; *Encyclopedia of American Biography*, see under "Norman R. Thomas"; Forum Papers, Hammond; Eleanor Roosevelt, "My Day," October 20, 1928, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers (George Washington University at Mount Vernon College, Washington, D.C.).

The lectures continued into the Second World War, stopping only when the gasoline shortage made private transportation too difficult. After her talk in Hammond, Mrs. Roosevelt wrote in her daily newspaper column that she was told the fifteen-year-old Forum at times had a great deal of difficulty in continuing to operate, "but this year forums have suddenly become popular and the demand for season tickets is overwhelming." Arthur Weiss, a leader of the temple and business community, worked with Dr. Kuhn from the beginning, serving as the moderator. A civic leader for many years, he probably prepared the publicity for the programs and the newspaper articles afterwards. Dr. Kuhn, in addition to her extensive medical practice, continued to lead the Forum as well as the League of Women Voters.<sup>32</sup>

According to a historian of Hammond, the Forum was held in high regard because of the leaders who volunteered their time and talents. The nearness to Chicago that made it easier for speakers to travel was augmented by personal friendships among the leaders. With such leadership and a broad range of stimulating speakers, the lectures opened new vistas, raised provocative questions, and created a model of deliberative democracy in the industrial city.<sup>33</sup>

Crosses burned in Hammond as the Beth-El Open Forum began, but for nineteen years the forum's speakers cast a wider, deeper, and more lasting light. Letters between local planners and Du Bois, written after his lecture in Hammond, capture the intellectual and interpersonal impact of the Forum. Kuhn wrote to Du Bois about the "spiritual entity grown inside of me . . . like a blossom in fertile soil." She expressed her deep hope to build a foundation of clear thinking and feeling for her children, "so they can later enrich themselves at the hearths of many nations and many races." Du Bois had given her "new strength and vision."<sup>34</sup>

There are some intriguing parallels in the careers of the two Indiana Forum founders, minister and rabbi. Both began activist leadership in the state soon after ordination, and each forged links with fellow clergy in their communities. After their trailblazing work, however, they left the pulpit, the minister for a long career in community relations and adult education, always using the Forum method, and

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<sup>32</sup>Granoff, interview by author; *Lake County Times*, October 20, 1924; *Hammond Times*, December 28-30, 1938, June 18, 1973, January 31, 1960; Janet Weiss Pence, letter to author, Mill Valley, California, May 7, 1991; Roosevelt, "My Day," October 20, 1928, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers; *Hammond Business*, February 1942, January 1944; scrapbooks, Hammond League of Women Voters, Pamphlet Folders Collection (Hammond Public Library, Hammond, Indiana); Millie Pilot (former League president), telephone interview by author, Hammond, Indiana, October 10, 1995.

<sup>33</sup>Marjorie Sohl (community historian), letter to author, Hammond, Indiana, August 30, 2001.

<sup>34</sup>*The Papers of W. E. B. Du Bois* (Sanford, N.C., 1980), microfilm, reels 16-19. The Du Bois visit is described in Arthur S. Meyers, "W. E. B. Du Bois and the Open Forum: Human Relations in a 'Difficult Industrial District,'" *Journal of Negro History* LXXXIV (Spring 1999), 192-204, quotations p. 200.



the rabbi for Jewish communal work and to operate a restaurant. While the reasons for their departures are not known, they may not have found in their daily pastoral duties the fulfillment that the Forum brought them, or perhaps their inner lives reflected what Reinhold Niebuhr and John Dewey described during the decade as the loss of faith and need for community. Whatever the reasons, their accomplishments in the two cities are evident. They broke new ground, bringing the "light" of the movement to two otherwise conservative Indiana communities.<sup>35</sup>

Even with the clergymen's leadership, the two series would have been impossible without the support of their congregations and of the wider community. The dedication of prominent people who served on planning committees, contacted lecturers, and made the necessary arrangements, in addition to the local newspapers that published accounts of the lectures to bring the learning to the public, reflect a deep, broad sense of civic responsibility rising within such small cities as Terre Haute and Hammond. And the ideal of the Open Forum as "the striking of mind upon mind" remains a model for a human-centered approach to public learning.

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<sup>35</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, "Can Christianity Survive?", *Atlantic Monthly* (January 1925), 84-88, and "A Religion Worth Fighting For," *Survey*, August 1, 1927, 444-46, 480. Niebuhr was a Student Director for the Open Forum with the Midwest Council for Social Discussion; Forum Papers, Rochester, May 8, 1925; Dewey, *Public and its Problems*.