

“Gone to Another Meeting”

Willard B. Ransom and Early Civil Rights Leadership

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ABSTRACT: Willard B. (Mike) Ransom’s career reveals the challenges of the early civil rights movement at the local level. Young, impatient, and armed with a Harvard law degree, Ransom returned from World War II to become Indiana president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and to challenge the state’s intense racial segregation. Ransom organized picketing of segregated restaurants, filed legal briefs, and travelled the state to organize NAACP branches. His sophisticated militancy led him to join the Progressive Party in 1948 and to run for Congress on the third-party ticket. In struggles within the national NAACP leadership, he challenged Walter White and supported W. E. B. Du Bois. As he led the fight for equality in Indianapolis and Indiana, Ransom faced opposition from African American moderates, anti-communists, and conservative Hoosiers generally.

KEYWORDS: Willard B. Ransom, NAACP, Indianapolis, civil rights movement, W. E. B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson

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“When I die,” Mike Ransom told a writer in 1982, “my wife says she wants to put on my tombstone ‘Gone to Another Meeting.’”¹ Despite a demanding career in law and business, Ransom had spent innumerable evenings and long days in meetings. Working in public arenas and behind the scenes, he provided expert and sophisticated leadership in the fight for civil rights. More progressive than his contemporaries, Ransom’s greatest achievements came years before those of Martin Luther King Jr. and other bright stars of the movement.

In the late 1940s, few Americans anticipated the stirrings that would explode across the nation a decade later. Recent scholarship provides contexts for a larger appreciation of Ransom’s pioneering contributions. First is the concept of a long civil rights movement extending back at least to the 1940s rather than a narrow focus on the King years. Second is a growing appreciation of the fight against Jim Crow in the North as well as South. And finally, historians have begun to understand the critical importance of local action as well as those national events that so inspire popular celebrations today. Simply put, challenges to racial segregation in Indianapolis, Fort Wayne, and other cities across Indiana in the late 1940s take on new significance in the larger story of American civil rights. At the center of these particular stories stood Mike Ransom.²

Ransom’s leadership became more aggressive than that of his father’s generation and more radical than that of most contemporaries in Indiana and America. Ransom placed his hopes in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The NAACP was central to his work, yet its moderation became also a source of frustration. Ransom’s militancy developed from an informed and keen experience with Indiana’s long tradition of racial prejudice and aversion to change. Young, impatient, and sophisticated, Ransom challenged the middle-class caution of many Hoosiers, black as well as white. In fact, his commitment led him to join the Progressive Party in 1948, a new third party so far to the left of the Democratic Party that critics often branded it (mistakenly) as communist. Ransom himself became a casualty of the virulent Red Scare that spread across the nation in the late 1940s and created an exceedingly hostile environment

¹ *Indianapolis Monthly*, July 1982.

² See, for example, Brian Purnell, “Freedom North Studies, the Long Civil Rights Movement, and Twentieth-Century Liberalism in American Cities,” *Journal of Urban History* 42 (May 2016), 634–40; John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana, Ill., 1994); Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York, 2008).



Freeman B. Ransom and Nettie Ransom pose with their children for their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, 1937. Mike Ransom, home from Harvard Law School, stands to the right.

The family's middle-class status can be seen in the portrait.

Courtesy: Ransom Family Collection, M1200, Indiana Historical Society.

for liberals and agitators of any sort. Thus, as he led the fight for equality Ransom faced opposition from African American moderates within the NAACP, from conservative Hoosiers generally, and from anticommunists.

The great-grandson of slaves, Willard B. Ransom ("Mike," to friends) grew up with privilege. Born in 1916, he was the third of six children. His father, Freeman Briley Ransom, known as F. B., attended Columbia University Law School and rose to a successful law and business career in Indianapolis.³ The Ransom family lived and worked in one of America's

³Ransom's family life and other details are based in part on three oral histories: Willard B. Ransom, Michelle Hale interviewer, November 21, December 5, 1990, January 23, 30, February 20, May 22, 1991, Indiana Historical Society Library; Willard B. Ransom, Greg Stone interviewer, July 18, 1983, Indiana University Oral History Research Center; Willard B. Ransom, Richard Pierce interviewer, July 26, 1994, in possession of Richard Pierce, who kindly loaned me a copy. Also, author's interview with Judy Ransom-Lewis, April 26, 2017; A'Lelia Bundles, *On Her Own Ground: The*

most segregated northern cities. Of his childhood experience with white people, Mike Ransom later recalled, “We never had any real close contact in terms of everyday activities.”⁴

The family home sat in the center of the city’s African American heart, the Indiana Avenue neighborhood.⁵ The grandest building was the headquarters of the Madam C. J. Walker Company, erected in 1927. F. B. was the general manager of this black-owned business that catered to African American women. Along the Avenue stood retail shops, restaurants, saloons, nightclubs, and offices for lawyers, doctors, funeral directors, and insurance salesmen. The *Indianapolis Recorder* followed news of the African American community and issues mostly ignored in the city’s three “white” papers. Mike and his siblings walked to Crispus Attucks, their neighborhood high school, opened in 1927 to draw tighter the official lines of racial separation. All African American kids in the city attended this one school, many passing white-only schools on their way. Mike Ransom was an excellent student and remembered later the sense of community at Attucks, the outstanding teachers, and the opportunities to excel in sports and on the debate team. He knew too that the Indiana High School Athletic Association barred Attucks teams from competition with white schools, a fact his father eloquently protested in a letter to the *Indianapolis Star* in 1934.⁶ And he knew the humiliations of daily segregation that closed

Life and Times of Madam C. J. Walker (New York, 2001), 106. An early assessment of Ransom’s career is Stanley Warren, “Willard B. Ransom: A Life Worth Living,” *Black History News & Notes* 97 (August 2004), 5–8.

⁴Hale interview, November 21, 1990, p. 25. For contexts, see Emma Lou Thornbrough, “Breaking Racial Barriers to Public Accommodations in Indiana, 1935–1963,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 83 (December 1987), 301–43; Emma Lou Thornbrough, *Indiana Blacks in the Twentieth Century* (Bloomington, Ind., 2000), 116–62; Richard B. Pierce, *Polite Protest: The Political Economy of Race in Indianapolis, 1920–1970* (Bloomington, Ind., 2005); James H. Madison, “Race, Law, and the Burdens of Indiana History,” in David J. Bodenhamer and Randall T. Shepard, eds., *The History of Indiana Law* (Athens, Ohio, 2006), 41–43; James H. Madison, *Hoosiers: A New History of Indiana* (Bloomington, Ind., 2014), 311–19.

⁵The Ransom home is now part of the Ransom Place Historic District, named in honor of F. B. and listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1992.

⁶“To Kathy and to David: The Memoir of Faburn E. DeFrantz,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 108 (June 2012), 134–35. See also Aram Goudsouzian, “Ba–ad, Ba–a–ad Tigers”: Crispus Attucks Basketball and Black Indianapolis in the 1950s,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 96 (March 2000), 4–43. A superb documentary film is “Attucks: The School That Opened a City” (WFYI Public Media and Ted Green Films, 2016).

doors at nearly all downtown restaurants, hotels, theaters, and other public places—"an overt slap in the face," he later remembered.⁷

With F. B. at the head, family dinner conversation often turned to challenges facing African Americans. By 1930, newcomers from the South had increased the city's black population to 12 percent. F. B. joined the NAACP and took leadership roles in many civil rights issues. The family attended the city's Monster Meetings organized by the segregated Senate Avenue YMCA, another anchor in the African American community. Speakers included George Washington Carver, W. E. B. Du Bois, Walter White, and Thurgood Marshall. Barred from the city's hotels, these distinguished Americans stayed in local homes, often with F. B. and Nettie Ransom, where "Miss Nettie's" fried chicken earned accolades. At the Monster Meetings and at the family dinner table, young Mike listened to the voices and the passions of the most notable African Americans of the day.⁸

Always, Mike considered his father's example. Late in life, he told an interviewer: "I've often thought stories on me ought to be my father's story."⁹ F. B. was a major force, to be sure, but Mike became his own person, working in different times and moving significantly away from the elder Ransom's more moderate approach to white prejudice.

From Attucks High School, Ransom went to Talladega College in Alabama. His uncle, Charleston B. Cox, was an alumnus who recruited several other Attucks graduates to the all-black school. Mike majored in history and found time for football, basketball, and debating. He even tried his hand at poetry. In 1936, the year of his graduation, the journal of the National Urban League, *Opportunity*, published his poem "I Was A Woman," a bleak vision of a woman "by poverty degraded" who was "lying at death's feet."¹⁰

Ransom's big jump into white America was to Harvard Law School in 1936. He later recalled arriving to register and looking around: "Damn, I don't see anybody else."¹¹ Ransom was, in fact, the only black student in his

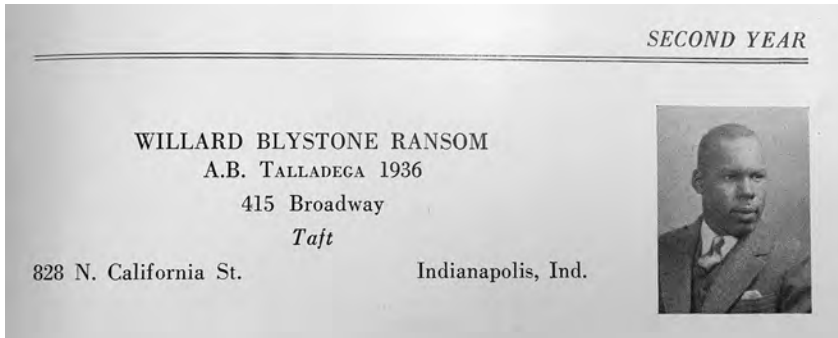
⁷ Hale interview, May 22, 1991, p. 41.

⁸ Stanley Warren, "The Monster Meetings at the Negro YMCA in Indianapolis," *Indiana Magazine of History* 91 (March 1995), 57–80.

⁹ *Indianapolis Recorder*, September 2, 1989. On F. B. Ransom's more conservative position see Mark Higbee, "W. E. B. Du Bois, F. B. Ransom, the Madam Walker Company, and Black Business Leadership in the 1930s," *Indiana Magazine of History* 89 (June 1993), 101–124.

¹⁰ Willard Ransom, "I Was a Woman," *Opportunity*, 14 (June 1936), 182. Likely Ransom's poem was influenced by the literature of the Harlem Renaissance.

¹¹ Stone interview, July 18, 1983, p. 14.



The Harvard Law School Yearbook entry for Willard B. Ransom, the only African American graduate in the class of 1939.

Courtesy: Harvard Law School Library.

law school graduating class. His first-year roommate was from Mississippi and asked for a different room. The administration refused. The two didn't speak for days, but after the Mississippian finally asked Ransom about a class assignment they formed a study group with several other students. Ransom always said he experienced little mistreatment in law school.

Harvard was demanding, but Ransom found time for fun. After his first year, he moved off campus to share a room with history Ph.D. student John Hope Franklin, who would become a pioneer of African American historical scholarship. The two very serious young men found friends and parties in Boston's segregated social scene and stayed in touch in the decades after.¹²

The Great Depression caused hard times for white Americans and worse for black Americans. When Ransom returned from the East in 1939 with a Harvard degree, the city offered little work for a new lawyer. His father used his political connections to get his son a part-time job in the Indiana Attorney General's office. Mike also did some general law work with two of the most respected black lawyers in town: Robert Lee Brokenburr, a moderate Republican, and Henry J. Richardson Jr., a Democratic member of the Indiana General Assembly (more liberal and "more my type," Ransom recalled).¹³ Law practice ended in 1941 when his draft notice arrived.

¹² Ransom to John Hope Franklin, April 11, 1958, Franklin to Ransom, April 21, 1958, Series 4: Correspondence, 1930s-2009, John Hope Franklin Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University. Ransom asked Franklin to "remember the poor boys at Harvard."

¹³ Hale interview, November 21, 1990, p. 61.

The army placed this Harvard-trained lawyer in the Chemical Warfare Service and sent him to the Edgewood Arsenal in Maryland. Assigned menial duties in an all-black unit with white officers, as was the custom in World War II, Ransom rose from private to sergeant. Superiors eventually realized their foolishness and sent him to Officer Candidate School. His class portrait, taken in March 1944, shows Lieutenant Ransom and one other black graduate among the class of new white officers.

In 1944, the Army transferred Ransom to Tuskegee, Alabama, where African American pilots trained for combat. Decades later, this racial experiment would warm the hearts of Americans searching for “good war” stories. Often minimized was the cruel treatment of black officers and fighter pilots on military bases and in nearby towns. White officials seldom intervened to challenge southern racial customs. The distinguished writer James Baldwin remembered that black parents often “felt a peculiar kind of relief when they knew their boys were being shipped out of the South to do battle overseas,” since “the most dangerous part of the journey had been passed.”¹⁴

Rigid military segregation ignited Ransom’s first direct civil rights action. African Americans at Tuskegee were carefully selected, educated, and mature. Ransom soon understood that “They weren’t gonna’ take a back seat to anybody.”¹⁵ The spark came over separate officers’ dining facilities, common across military bases. On August 3, 1944, Captain Ransom, the elected president of the black officers club, led a group of twelve black men into the Post Exchange restaurant, reserved for white officers. Ransom asked to be served. Ordered to move to the separate dining room, the men refused. A similar event a few months later at Freeman Field in southern Indiana brought arrests and charges of mutiny against disobedient black officers. The Freeman Field “mutiny” became one of the disgraces of World War II. At Tuskegee, the base commander was wiser than his counterpart at Freeman. Ransom had done his homework and showed Colonel Noel Parrish two recent War Department documents that suggested integration of dining facilities. Colonel Parrish relented, the men sat down and ate, and peaceful integration came to one base in central Alabama. The incident left hard feelings. Many white officers refused to eat in the integrated dining room. Some asked to

¹⁴ Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 2009), 268–69.

¹⁵ Hale interview, December 5, 1990, p. 15.



Captain Mike Ransom, wearing the Judge Advocate General (JAG) insignia, c. 1945.
The Army eventually opened law practice to this graduate of Harvard Law School.
Courtesy: Ransom Family Collection, M1200, Indiana Historical Society.

be transferred to other bases. Colonel Parrish had to reassure neighboring towns that the military had no expectation of integration off the base.¹⁶

Near the end of the war Ransom transferred to the Judge Advocate General's Department. After training in Washington, D. C., he shipped out to France and Belgium. Based mostly in Brussels, he worked on legal cases arising from American GIs tired of war, reluctant to follow rules, eager only to get home. Many "have nothing to do but get drunk and fight each other," he wrote his parents in late 1945. Ransom was discontent over larger issues. There was "no racial discrimination in my case—none whatsoever." But he saw the "fundamental hypocrisy" of military leaders, who "if they only believed in democracy themselves perhaps . . . would begin to see the light."¹⁷ Captain Ransom knew firsthand the reality of black GIs assigned the

¹⁶ Daniel L. Haulman, "A Tale of Two Commanders," at <http://www.redtail.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/A-Tale-of-Two-Commanders.pdf>; J. Todd Moye, *Freedom Flyers: The Tuskegee Airmen of World War II* (New York, 2010), 70–92.

¹⁷ Ransom to parents, September 5, 1945, Ransom Family Papers, 1912–2011, Indiana Historical Society Library, Indianapolis. See also *Indianapolis Recorder*, September 2, 1989.

most menial chores in tightly segregated units. He knew well that military punishment, including execution, was far harsher for black soldiers than white ones. He later told a reporter that the Jim Crow army was “hard to take.” Like many African American veterans who joined the civil rights movement, he “came home a ‘hardened liberal’ ready to take a stand for his race.” Another Hoosier veteran was blunter when he looked back on his homecoming: “I decided I wasn’t going to take this shit anymore.”¹⁸

Returning to postwar Indianapolis, Ransom resumed his legal work but added a job with the Walker Company as assistant manager and then in 1954, as manager, following his father’s footsteps. The two jobs provided him sufficient income and security, though never wealth. In 1947, he married Gladys Williams, a Walker Company secretary and a 1937 graduate of Attucks. The couple’s application for a marriage license included two lines where they indicated their race as “col,” thereby certifying that they were not violating Indiana’s law against racially mixed marriages.¹⁹

Mike and Gladys Ransom determined to shelter their children from the harshness of white racism. Each summer, the extended family would go off to Fox Lake in northeastern Indiana, where F. B. had built a cottage in 1932. Fox Lake offered an all-black refuge for African Americans barred from most other midwestern lakeside resorts. Mike left work to join the family on some weekends and the Fourth of July. He loved to fish and to socialize with other middle-class and professional African Americans. The summer included an annual Talladega College reunion. Dozens of alumni and their families from across the Midwest reminisced about old times, often joined by the Talladega president. Fox Lake summers were part of the Ransoms’ strategy of protecting their children, both from the hot Indianapolis summer where kids could get into trouble and especially from the humiliation of color lines. Mike Ransom seldom talked with his young children about segregation or explained what he was doing to end it. The family simply didn’t go to Indianapolis restaurants. That meant

¹⁸ *Indianapolis News*, November 1, 1949; Harley Burden Jr., interview with author, September 4, 1998. For the ambiguous impact of the war, see Kevin M. Kruse and Stephen Tuck, eds., *Fog of War: The Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 2012). For insight into Ransom’s discontent, see Mary Louise Roberts, *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI In World War II France* (Chicago, 2013).

¹⁹ Online at Ancestry.com: https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/interactive/60282/007578383_00380/6484799?backurl=https%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestrylibrary.com%2fcgi-bin%2fsse.dll%3fgst%3d-6&ssrc=&backlabel=ReturnSearchResults.

passing by the Tee Pee Drive-In as the kids sat in the back seat wondering why they couldn't stop at one of the city's most popular places.²⁰

Gladys Williams had married a good-looking, fit, athletic man, who was lots of fun, telling stories and jokes, saying hello to people even if he didn't know them. He never bragged, certainly not about a Harvard degree or other achievements. He went to work in a suit and tie and never called in sick even if he was. The couple went out to friends' homes to play cards and listen to jazz, and they enjoyed dinners organized by African American social clubs where Mike wore his tuxedo and Gladys a long gown. They lived on California Street, next door to his parents' home, where his mother kept close watch over her grandchildren.²¹

Gladys knew from the start that her husband would be going to lots of meetings without her. "He was always gone," daughter Judy recalled, yet remembered too that when home he listened to her problems and gave loving, if lawyerly-like, advice. The business of the NAACP took Mike from his family. "My idea was to use the NAACP as our major battering ram," he later recalled. The organization suffered from a "vacuum" of leadership, and Ransom "jumped into it."²²

The NAACP in the 1940s was the nation's most powerful civil rights organization. Its New York City headquarters housed noted leaders, but members of the state and local branch organizations did the real work, occasionally assisted by national field workers. Many Indiana towns formed branches within a few years of the organization's founding in 1909. Most depended on the energy and commitment of a handful of local black leaders—sometimes only one, and then, often, a woman. Such was the case of Flossie Bailey, the Marion, Indiana, branch president who challenged the horrific lynching of two black teenagers on the Grant County courthouse square in 1930. Branches won an occasional battle. Mostly they lost, as was the case when Flossie Bailey failed in her crusade to bring lynch mob leaders to justice.²³

²⁰ Author's interview with Judy Ransom-Lewis, April 26, 2017; Glory-June Greiff, "Fox Lake," National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, 2001, at https://secure.in.gov/apps/dnr/shaard/r/22fce/N/Fox_Lake_Steuben_CO_Nom.pdf; Claudia Polley, "Segregation Creates Hidden Paradise," *Indiana Preservationist* (July/August 1993), 12–13; *Indianapolis Recorder*, November 5, 1949, August 16, 1952, August 29, 1964.

²¹ Author's interview with Judy Ransom-Lewis, April 26, 2017.

²² Hale interview, December 5, 1990, p. 36.

²³ James H. Madison, *A Lynching in the Heartland: Race and Memory in America* (New York, 2001); Madison, "Flossie Bailey: 'What a Woman!'" *Traces of Indiana and Midwestern History* (February

The Indianapolis branch formed in 1913, but seldom flourished, often going dormant and sometimes losing its national charter for lack of members. F. B. Ransom wrote in 1940 to ask Walter White, longtime NAACP head, for help since “the local branch here seems to be rather dead.” In the New York office, staffer Dean Pickens noted on F. B.’s letter that “Indianapolis is a hard ‘joint’”—so hard that headquarters decided it was not worth sending limited resources to this “sore spot.” Another national staffer wrote in late 1941 that Indianapolis “is the only large city in America where there is not an active, wide-awake branch of the NAACP.”²⁴

African Americans in the capital city were in some ways like other Hoosiers. “Polite,” historian Richard Pierce labeled them. “Passive,” Ransom said.²⁵ Nice Hoosiers, family oriented, eager to get along, reluctant to disrupt. Many took comfort in a belief that life in Indianapolis was better than in the South. And, of course, most struggled to put food on the table in a town where good jobs were few. The Great Depression hit hard, raising unemployment among the city’s African American residents to 75 percent, F. B. estimated in 1933. The city’s major employer, Eli Lilly and Company, only hired blacks as custodians, the norm in this northern city. Bursts of resistance and protest had surfaced, notably over plans to build the new segregated high school in the 1920s. With the rise of Indiana’s Ku Klux Klan, based in the Republican Party, many black voters protested also by shifting their traditional Republican allegiance to Democrats. Roosevelt’s New Deal pulled them even closer. Lamenting the prevalence of “every type of discrimination in this State,” F. B. Ransom, like so many other black Hoosiers, switched to the Democratic Party in the 1930s, even though that party did little to address racial inequality.²⁶

2000), 23–27. For the important work of the branches and NAACP field workers and the occasional differences between national and local leaders, see Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*; Kevern Verney and Lee Sartain, *Long Is the Way and Hard: One Hundred Years of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)* (Fayetteville, Ark., 2009).

²⁴ F. B. Ransom to Morrow, May 16, 1940, Pickens to Morrow, May 21, 1940, Morrow to Pickens, May 29, 1940, Morrow to Dear Friends, December 8, 1941, all in Part II: C55, Papers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C., hereafter NAACP Papers. Scholarship on branches is too thin to make strong comparative assessments, but Cleveland, Detroit, Baltimore, and other cities had more active branches than Indianapolis. Lee Sartain, *Borders of Equality: The NAACP and the Baltimore Civil Rights Struggle, 1914–1970* (Jackson, Miss., 2013); Verney and Sartain, *Long Is the Way and Hard*.

²⁵ Pierce, *Polite Protest*; Pierce interview, July 26, 1994.

²⁶ F. B. Ransom to Pickens, March 10, 1933, Part I: G64, NAACP Papers. See also William W. Giffin, “The Political Realignment of Black Voters in Indianapolis, 1924,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 79 (June 1983), 133–66.

Changing times followed World War II. Migration from the South resumed. The rising tide of economic growth was strong enough to lift even some black boats. The new finance center at Fort Benjamin Harrison and a few other employers provided better jobs. Among the newcomers to the city were some more likely to join in NAACP work.²⁷

Even some whites began to question traditions of segregation. Important allies came from labor unions, especially the United Auto Workers (UAW) and others affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), the League of Women Voters, and religious leaders. Jewish Hoosiers, particularly members of the Indianapolis Jewish Community Relations Council, often joined in civil rights struggles.²⁸

These shifts sparked a radical push against the moderate and polite traditions of the Indianapolis NAACP branch, “the object of jibes and adverse criticism by members of the National Staff,” as a member of that staff wrote in 1944.²⁹ At a branch meeting at Mt. Zion Baptist Church on January 4, 1945, the longtime members presented their nominations for officers in the customary manner. An outside group then rose to present its “Citizen’s Committee” slate. The old guard claimed irregularities and angrily walked out. The rump elected their candidates. Seventeen of the defeated then wrote the national office to protest that the new officers had been “elected illegally” and were not “worthy citizens of good leadership.”³⁰

The least “worthy” was Lowell M. Trice, the Citizens Committee leader. Twenty-six years of age with experience in journalism, Trice promised an “unrelenting fight on all forms of racial discrimination.”³¹ Abandoning traditional caution and budget penny-pinching, he sent the New York office lengthy telegrams, made long-distance telephone calls, and ordered 10,000 membership forms, 1,000 buttons, and boxes of pamphlets and broadsides. Director of Branches Ella Baker responded with encouragement but a mild

²⁷ Jessie Jacobs to Walter White and Gloster Current, n.d. [December 1952], Part II: A548, NAACP Papers.

²⁸ Krista Kinslow, “The Road to Freedom Is Long and Winding: Jewish Involvement in the Indianapolis Civil Rights Movement,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 108 (March 2012), 1–34; *Indianapolis Recorder*, February 19, 1949; Thornbrough, “Breaking Racial Barriers,” 316–17.

²⁹ R. B. McArthur to Ella Baker, April 15, 1944, Part II: C55, NAACP Papers.

³⁰ Minutes of the Indianapolis Branch Meeting, January 4, 1945; Priscilla Dean Lewis to Baker, January 5, 1945; R. B. McArthur, petition, January 6, 1945, all in Part II: C55, NAACP Papers.

³¹ *Indianapolis Recorder*, January 13, 1945.



Mike Ransom speaks at a meeting organized by Flanner House and the Friends' Western Yearly Meeting Peace and Service Committee, 1948. Cleo Blackburn, director of Flanner House, left, and interdenominational religious leader Grover Hartman.

Courtesy: M0513, Indiana Historical Society.

admonition, beginning with “While we appreciate your enthusiasm.”³² Baker might have become a perfect and powerful ally for Trice. She was committed to building grassroots leadership and to moving away from the moderation and elitism she disdained in the national office. Additionally,

³²Baker to Lowell Trice, May 29, 1945, Trice to Lucille Black, May 21, 1945, Trice to Roy Wilkins, March 19, 1945, II: C55, NAACP Papers.

Baker understood the challenges in the local branch, as she had organized and attended a leadership conference in Indianapolis in early 1945.³³

Trice acted. He talked to the Indianapolis mayor when two sisters were thrown out of the ice rink at the Indiana State Fair Coliseum because of their race. He organized a boycott of Riverside Amusement Park's Negro Days, the two days when the white-only park was open to African Americans. He spent immense energy on the officers' mutiny at Freeman Field, rushing in and causing unease that he was circumventing the national office's careful response.³⁴

Trice was too far ahead of his time. And he was open to charges of mismanagement. He won reelection as branch president in early 1946, but opposing forces in Indianapolis and in the national office were preparing to remove him. Branch treasurer Andrew W. Ramsey wrote Baker to charge that Trice "has conducted the affairs of the branch like an inspired mad man and tin-horn dictator," making "unauthorized and dishonest uses of the funds of the branch." Ramsey begged the New York staff to send help to "this northern capitol of jimcrowism." As a result, Roy Wilkins and Thurgood Marshall visited Indianapolis. Marshall concluded that Trice was a "self-seeking arrogant person"; Baker agreed. Although she told Walter White that "there is a dearth of available branch leadership material in Indianapolis," she joined in recommending that the national board remove Trice from office and suspend the branch charter.³⁵

Trice's impetuous leadership reflected a growing impatience with the segregation that flourished outside the branch's Indiana Avenue office. Across the city, African Americans were raising new questions regarding racial inequality, sparking a white backlash. Rumors circulated that Indiana's defunct Ku Klux Klan was coming back to tamper such aspirations. Anxiety over a revived Klan led to a mass meeting of religious, labor, and civil rights advocates in January 1947. The Provisional Indiana Council for Unity voiced strong support for a proposed anti-hate bill before the

³³ Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2003), 105–147. Baker resigned in May 1946, because of her differences with White and her dislike of bureaucratic rigidity.

³⁴ Wilkins to Trice, April 21, 1945, II: B160, NAACP Papers; Trice to Baker: II, C366, NAACP Papers. Riverside Park continued to post signs reading "White Patronage Only Solicited," into the 1960s. Thornbrough, "Breaking Racial Barriers," 323.

³⁵ Andrew W. Ramsey to Baker, January 19, 1946, Thurgood Marshall to White, April 20, 1946, Baker to White, April 16, 1946, all in II: C366, NAACP Papers. See also Ramsey to White, April 1, 1946, II: C336, NAACP Papers; Marshall to Madison Jones, March 19, 1946, II: C366, NAACP Papers.

General Assembly. Ransom thought the new law of little value and, as a lawyer, questioned its potential violation of free speech.³⁶

Captain Mike Ransom heard about the Trice tempest soon after he took off his uniform. He showed up at the first meeting called to plan a branch reorganization and asked Trice, who had declined to step down, to summarize recent events. Trice refused to explain. It took considerable time and money as well as legal action and another visit from Thurgood Marshall to force Trice out of office. To head the detailed cleanup work, Marshall appointed the young lawyer home from war.³⁷

Ransom quickly discovered that Trice had left behind a financial mess. As trustee he took over all finances and began to pay the debts. On June 4, 1946, he called a meeting of former executive board members to begin the process of applying for a return of the branch charter. Ransom urged quick approval, but White, Marshall, and others in New York were unwilling to move forward until they were sure Trice was fully gone. Ransom did convince them to take over the branch debts. By mid-summer, he was on a first-name basis with Marshall and other national staff members.³⁸

Meetings followed through the summer of 1946 to plan a membership drive and raise money. Trice was still fighting to hold on, so the Indianapolis group still exhibited some “enthusiasm for sniping at each other,” as one staff member reported. An election on September 16, 1946, finally brought new officers and an executive committee that included Mike Ransom. The national charter returned, but many remained apprehensive about the future of a very shaky branch.³⁹

During the turmoil in Indianapolis, the South Bend and Fort Wayne branches had urged the national office to help organize a statewide conference. This annual event had fallen on hard times during the Depression and World War II. In late October 1947, thirty representatives from Elkhart, Indianapolis, Kokomo, Muncie, Terre Haute, Anderson, and Fort Wayne gathered at Fort Wayne’s Union Baptist Church. Organizers helpfully provided a list of restaurants that would serve the delegates, a necessary

³⁶ McCabe Betty to White, November 12, 1946, II: C336, NAACP Papers; *Indianapolis Recorder*, January 26, 1947; Hale interview, January 23, 1991, pp. 3, 6.

³⁷ Jacqueline Young to White, April 19, 1946, II: C366, NAACP Papers. The correspondence on the Trice affair is voluminous.

³⁸ Willard B. Ransom to Walter White, June 6 and July 15, 1946, Minutes, June 4, 1946, Ransom to Robert L. Carter, July 25, 1946, Donald Jones to Current, September 21, 1946, II: C367, NAACP Papers.

³⁹ Donald Jones to Madison Jones, August 22, 1946, II: C367, NAACP Papers.

tradition at NAACP gatherings across the state. Most stayed in private homes, since the hotels would not accept them.⁴⁰ The Fort Wayne meeting nonetheless marked a step toward more engagement from white Hoosiers. Some whites participated in the sessions. The host Fort Wayne branch itself was “highly interracial,” as were some elsewhere in the state. Fort Wayne’s branch president, Aron S. Gilmartin, a white Unitarian minister, reported a “good spirit of cooperation among the town people, especially the press and radio station.” He announced also that Mike Ransom had agreed to become the new president of the Indiana NAACP.⁴¹

“No one else wanted the job,” Ransom later said. That was likely true. The congratulatory letter from the New York office informed him that there were fewer than 3,000 NAACP members in Indiana, so that new member recruitment was a first necessity. Nor was there a treasury. The Fort Wayne conference had failed to raise money, but the national office promised the new state president \$15 for postage.⁴²

Mike Ransom moved quickly. He was well aware of the long NAACP tradition of recruiting black lawyers to do battle. He doubtless had heard stories of the 1930 lynching in Marion, when Flossie Bailey made quick phone calls and sent telegrams to black lawyers in Indianapolis (including his father’s colleague at the Walker Company, Robert Brokenburr). And he knew instances such as the one a decade later when the Hammond branch, after deciding to challenge local restaurants posting signs reading “We cater only to Whites,” wrote New York headquarters asking for relevant Indiana statutes and legal advice. Thurgood Marshall responded with detailed suggestions.⁴³

Ransom brought his own legal skills to dozens of Indiana cases. One of the most contentious centered on Robert Watts, a black man convicted of the rape and murder of a white woman. Ransom and other lawyers took

⁴⁰ In 1950 Walter White stayed at Fort Wayne’s Keenan Hotel, Gilmartin noted, “with no embarrassment whatsoever.” White was light-skinned and could pass, as he did in Marion in 1930. Aron S. Gilmartin to Black, February 19, 1950. II: Box C54, NAACP Papers; Madison, *Lynching in the Heartland*, 66–67.

⁴¹ Gilmartin to White and Wilkins, October 28, 1947, I: G60, NAACP Papers. On white membership in Richmond, see Francis Daniels to Black, March 1, 1947, II: C56, NAACP Papers. For Fort Wayne contexts, see Peggy Seigel, “Pushing the Color Line: Race and Employment in Fort Wayne, Indiana, 1933–1963,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 104 (September 2008), 269–71.

⁴² Hale Interview, December 5, 1990, p. 36; Current to Ransom, October 28, 1947, I: G60, NAACP Papers.

⁴³ Madison, *Lynching in the Heartland*, 63–67; Milton Kaplan to NAACP, January 16, 1940, Marshall to Kaplan, February 23, 1940, II: C55, NAACP Papers.

the case in 1949, not because they believed Watts innocent, but because the Indianapolis grand jury that indicted Watts was all-white and because there was evidence of police brutality in forcing Watts to confess. NAACP lawyers appealed the case all the way to the United States Supreme Court, getting a victory on procedural issues, though not saving Watts from the Michigan City electric chair. For Ransom, it meant phone calls, letters, and meetings, as he sought to gather legal talent and funds to ensure justice. Although he understood that defending a black man accused of raping and murdering a white woman would, as it certainly did, release intense white anger, Ransom optimistically detected a shift toward better public understanding of the fundamental legal issues at stake. Ransom probably received no fees in this case, as in many others.⁴⁴

Ransom knew well the necessity of using legal tools to attack inequality and therefore spent much of his time on such personal cases. But his first priority in the late 1940s became school segregation. He understood segregation as an alumnus of Crispus Attucks High School. As he drove his Plymouth to Jeffersonville and Gary, to Evansville and Elkhart, to Terre Haute and Richmond he learned more about Jim Crow schools and about his native state.

Ransom sat with other delegates at the 1947 Fort Wayne conference in a Saturday session that continued into the late evening. Mostly they discussed school segregation. They studied a map of Indianapolis schools, which showed how black children were “forced to cross town in overcrowded school buses to attend all negro schools rather than in their district.” They passed around model petitions and planned strategies and details for organization and action.⁴⁵

Across the state, some dozen-and-a-half local branches began to act. Elkhart delegates returned from the Fort Wayne conference determined to end school segregation. They recruited to town NAACP staff member Marion Wynn Perry, a Brooklyn College graduate and a sophisticated

⁴⁴The extensive correspondence on the Watts case is in II: B54, NAACP Papers, and II: Box 70, Legal Defense and Educational Fund, NAACP Papers. Ransom worked closely with a white lawyer from Shelbyville, Warren M. Brown. For the extremes of criticism see Harry R. Calkins, “Review of the News,” WISH radio, March 6, 1949, transcript in II: Box 70, Legal Defense and Educational Fund, NAACP Papers. Among Calkins’s allegations was that former Indiana Klan leader, D. C. Stephenson, also in the Michigan City Petitionary, assisted Watts in preparing his defense case. Watts was tried again and executed in 1951.

⁴⁵Geraldine Findley, “Minutes of State Conference for October 25, 1947,” I: G60, NAACP Papers. See also Ronald D. Cohen, “The Dilemma of School Integration in the North: Gary, Indiana, 1945–1960,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 82 (June 1986), 161–84.

lawyer. She helped organize petitions and protests as she led what Ransom described as “a brilliant campaign which delivered the knock-out blow to segregated schools”.⁴⁶ Segregationists burned two crosses in Elkhart’s black neighborhood but soon retreated as integration proceeded. A sympathetic local white reporter later wrote Perry that Elkhart children have been “performing the un-American deed of being educated in the same schools, and as yet we have not heard of one untoward . . . incident.”⁴⁷

Ransom paid close attention to these stirrings. Even as he became a new father in March 1948, he continued speaking at workshops and encouraging branch leaders. He took on more legal cases. Sometimes just filing a legal suit was sufficient to open doors, as was the case with the Esquire Theater in Indianapolis.⁴⁸ Sometimes he worked with partners such as the national leadership of the Union of Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers to gain admission of four Indianapolis workers to the lily-white local.⁴⁹ In early 1948, the Indianapolis *Recorder* placed him on its “Race Relations Honor Roll” because of “his single-hearted championing of the rights of the common man and oppressed minorities.”⁵⁰ He enjoyed working closely with the NAACP national staff, particularly its chief lawyer, Thurgood Marshall. Marshall was only eight years older than Ransom but well along in a career that would mark him as one of America’s greatest lawyers and Supreme Court justices. Ransom had great respect for Marshall’s legal talents. And, he later recalled, Marshall was “a lot of fun to be around and a very clever man,” and “a great story teller.”⁵¹

Like many of his generation, however, Ransom was impatient.⁵² In early 1948, he challenged Marshall’s cautious strategy to delay legal action on school segregation until a more favorable United States Supreme Court ruling provided a greater potential for success. Ransom appreciated the necessity for careful and methodical legal preparation, but he believed that

⁴⁶ *Indianapolis Recorder*, July 3, 1948.

⁴⁷ Al Pinsky to Marion Wynn Perry, [1948], II: B137, NAACP Papers.

⁴⁸ *Indianapolis Recorder*, January 1, 1949.

⁴⁹ *Indianapolis Recorder*, January 15, 1949.

⁵⁰ *Indianapolis Recorder*, January 10, 1948.

⁵¹ Hall interview, February 20, 1999, p. 35

⁵² Generational divides were common. A Kokomo branch leader wrote that young people expressed “a dislike for the long winded procedure of some older members.” John J. Simmons to Current, May 27, 1953, II: C56, NAACP Papers.



Mike Ransom (left) and Robert Lee Brokenburr, two of Indiana's leading African American lawyers, try a case, 1948.

Courtesy: Indianapolis Recorder Collection, Indiana Historical Society.

such cautious waiting was causing loss of interest among members. And he wanted a more broadly focused challenge, as he wrote to the NAACP's top lawyer: "we should set without delay in an all-out attack upon the system—including legal action." Ransom was already doing exactly that, he wrote Marshall: "we are going to approach the various school boards again with petitions asking abolition of segregated schools, utilize the coming elections to place politicians on the spot on the issue, prepare for introduction of another bill in the 1949 legislature outlawing segregation in education, and in general, use all methods that are practicable and feasible to attack the setup."⁵³

As mobilization and protest proceeded across the state, Ransom joined Henry Richardson in drafting a "Fair Schools" bill for the Indiana General

⁵³ Ransom to Marshall, April 8, 1948, II: B137, NAACP Papers. For larger contexts of different strategies see Kenneth W. Mack, "Law and Mass Politics in the Making of the Civil Rights Lawyer, 1931–1941," *Journal of American History* 93 (June 2006), 37–62.

Assembly. Ransom continued to work closely with Marshall and convinced him to give the keynote speech at the annual state conference in Indianapolis in December 1948. "Speaking informally and with frequent humorous sallies," the Indianapolis *Recorder* reported, "the famed Supreme Court attorney held his listeners spellbound as he challenged Indiana citizens."⁵⁴

At the 1949 session, the Indiana General Assembly passed the Fair Schools bill requiring an end to segregated schools. The state's leading African American newspaper editorialized: "Weighing our words carefully, we assert that this is the greatest forward stride in democracy made by the Hoosier state since the Civil War." And the editor added that "the new spirit of freedom that is rising everywhere carried the day."⁵⁵ Ransom was elated. The new law marked, he wrote, "for the first time, a real deathblow at segregation in Indiana, together with the unification of all groups and organizations interested in civil rights."⁵⁶

Beyond his use of legal and political means, Ransom moved in the late 1940s to direct action and public protest, years before the more well-known sit-ins and demonstrations chronicled in twenty-first-century history textbooks. With his experience at Tuskegee in mind, he led demonstrations and sit-ins at an Indianapolis White Castle hamburger stand, a Haag's drugstore, and several restaurants. Most included only a handful of protesters, primarily young black men and women and sometimes a few whites. One of the largest sit-ins was at Fendrick's Restaurant, which served only white travelers using the downtown bus station. The *Recorder* described it as "one of the worst jim crow institutions in Indianapolis." Ransom walked in and sat down with fifty young protesters, including six whites. The manager placed "out of service" signs on their tables. They waited an hour without being served. As white customers were turned away from the packed restaurant, the manager relented and segregation ended. One of the smallest sit-ins came when Ransom and Jessie Jacobs, a leader in the Indianapolis branch, sat down in the tea room of a major downtown department store. The two remained seated even after the manager put a screen in front of their table to shield white patrons from the unseemly

⁵⁴ *Indianapolis Recorder*, December 11, 1948.

⁵⁵ *Indianapolis Recorder*, March 12, 1949. See also Pierce, *Polite Protest*, 26–55; Monroe H. Little Jr. "The Battle for Educational Freedom: The 1949 Indiana 'Fair Schools' Bill," *Ohio Valley History* 14 (Fall 2014), 3–25; *Indianapolis Star*, December 5, 1948; Marshall to William T. Ray, October 13, 1948, II: C55, NAACP Papers; "'To Kathy and to David,'" 125–32.

⁵⁶ Ransom to Current, April 14, 1950, I: G60, NAACP Papers.



Governor Henry F. Shricker signs into law the Indiana school desegregation bill of 1949.

This step toward legal equality came after intense work by Ransom and other leaders in the NAACP (not present in this photo).

Courtesy: Indianapolis Recorder Collection, Indiana Historical Society.

sight. Several times Ransom was arrested; often, he was subject to insults and epithets.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Hale interview, December 5, 1990, pp. 43, 46; *Indianapolis Recorder*, November 13, 1948, (quote), January 15, 1949. See also Thornbrough, "Breaking Racial Barriers," 314–20. Such protests erupted

By early 1948, Mike Ransom had become more radical than many of his civil rights colleagues in Indiana and in the NAACP national office. His growing impatience and passion came as America's domestic and international tensions mixed into a perilous brew that repressed liberal reforms everywhere. The Cold War with the Soviet Union intensified, and Americans discovered the threat of communism at home as well as overseas. There were, in fact, communists and even Soviet spies in postwar America, but far fewer than feared. Loyalty programs (which assumed red infiltration) identified and rooted out alleged communists from government positions and public life. The secondary, at times primary, goal of such groups was to reverse the liberal reforms of the New Deal and the Democratic Party. The most visible anticommunist was Wisconsin Senator Joe McCarthy, joined by Indiana Senator William Jenner. Anticommunists often claimed that the fight for racial equality was part of the communist conspiracy to weaken the nation. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover aggressively investigated alleged communists in civil rights activities. In early 1949, Indiana opponents of civil rights sent members of the state legislature vicious mailings that labeled NAACP leaders as "communists" who have fallen for "Russian propaganda."⁵⁸ The legislature eagerly passed anticommunist resolutions. NAACP leaders agonized over an effective defense, but many decided to join Cold War anticommunist liberals because they feared the political risks of being tarred as reds. As a consequence of this expedient accommodation, the NAACP focused more narrowly on legal challenges to school segregation (culminating on the Brown case in 1954) and surrendered its potential for more aggressive and progressive action in the late 1940s and 1950s.⁵⁹

In the midst of Cold War anticommunism came the 1948 Presidential election. The NAACP was formally non-partisan, but Walter White and other leaders made very clear their support for President Harry Truman.

in other Indiana places. See, for example, the picketing in East Chicago in Thomas L. Bynum, *NAACP Youth and the Fight for Black Freedom, 1936–1965* (Knoxville, Tenn., 2013), 54–56.

⁵⁸ *Indianapolis Recorder*, January 15, 1949.

⁵⁹ Manfred Berg, "Black Civil Rights and Liberal Anticommunism: The NAACP in the Early Cold War," *Journal of American History* 94 (June 2007), 75–96; Landon R. Y. Storrs, *The Second Red Scare and the Unmaking of the New Deal Left* (Princeton, N.J., 2013); Risa Lauren Goluboff, *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), 217–37; Justin E. Walsh, *The Centennial History of the Indiana General Assembly* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1987), 470–77. FBI surveillance and reporting on suspected communists and radicals within the civil rights movement continued in Indiana into the 1960s. See Indianapolis, [Indiana]—157–1-v.8 [Classification—Civil Unrest]—Possible Racial Violence in Major Urban Areas—National Association for Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Records of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1896–2008, Record Group 65, National Archives at College Park, College Park, Md.

They highlighted Truman's shift toward a more liberal civil rights position, including his executive order to end segregation in the military and his distinction as the first president to address delegates to the NAACP annual meeting, where in 1947 he spoke from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Truman became all the more appealing when southern whites abandoned the Democratic Party to support Dixiecrat candidate Strom Thurmond.⁶⁰

A minority at NAACP headquarters, led by elder statesman W. E. B. Du Bois, argued that Truman was still too timid. They endorsed third party candidate Henry Wallace and his Progressive Party. Many NAACP branch leaders favored Wallace, but the national office pressured them to stick with the Democrats and avoid giving the White House to Republicans by supporting a third-party candidate with little chance of victory.⁶¹

The Progressive Party became a lightning rod for anticommunists. The party welcomed support from all on the left, including sympathizers and members of the Communist Party. Anticommunist protestors disrupted Progressive rallies in Evansville, Indianapolis, and elsewhere. The third party struggled in the late 1940s as labor unions, universities, and individuals fought against the slur of being red. The onset of the Korean War in mid-1950 aggravated tensions. Even the moderate *Indianapolis Times* reported in 1951 that the Communist Party had "espionage agents in Indiana who have been schooled in factory sabotage, bomb-making, kidnaping, train wrecking, mutiny and civil warfare."⁶²

In this sea of crosscurrents, Mike Ransom decided to support Wallace and the Progressive Party. It was a choice of large consequence and evidence of his need for more rapid change. In an Indianapolis speech in March 1948, Ransom condemned the failure of the Truman administration to do "anything about civil rights except to appoint a committee." "The test comes," he said, "in defending the rights of the smallest and most hated

⁶⁰ Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*, 345–46.

⁶¹ Thomas W. Devine, *Henry Wallace's 1948 Presidential Campaign and the Future of Postwar Liberalism* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2013); Manfred Berg, "Black Civil Rights and Liberal Anticommunism," 75–96; Simon Topping, "'Supporting Our Friends and Defeating Our Enemies': Militancy and Nonpartisanship in the NAACP, 1936–1948," *Journal of African American History* 89 (Winter 2004), 17–35; David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Biography* (New York, 2009), 646–95; Kenneth Robert Janken, *White: The Biography of Walter White, Mr. NAACP* (New York, 2003), 313–23.

⁶² Dale R. Sorenson, "The Anticommunist Consensus in Indiana 1945–1958," PhD dissertation, Indiana University, Bloomington, 1980, pp. 75–179; *Indianapolis Times*, February 25, 1951, quoted in *ibid.*, 132.

minority.” He condemned the nation’s House UnAmerican Activities Committee for “smearing citizens without proof.”⁶³ Wallace was “very inspiring,” Ransom later recalled, especially in using moral grounds to condemn racism. Such condemnation came for other leading Wallace supporters, especially Paul Robeson, a heroic figure in black America. Ransom met the actor and singer when he came to Indianapolis in early 1947. Robeson attracted an audience of 2,500 at Cadle Tabernacle, but along with his superb singing came “propaganda . . . stark and blatant,” according to one critical white reviewer.⁶⁴ Robeson again spoke bluntly at an interracial gathering organized by several white church leaders at the Central Avenue YMCA. Ransom listened approvingly while Robeson told a standing-room-only crowd that Indianapolis was “the worst center of discrimination in the North” and the only city on his northern tour where he could not get a hotel room.⁶⁵ (Mike and Gloria several times welcomed the singer and his wife, Eslanda, as guests in their home.) Many Americans thought the Robesons too radical and too sympathetic to communists. Red-baiting intensified, the FBI hounded them, and eventually the government succeeded in having Paul Robeson’s passport confiscated.⁶⁶

At a Progressive Party rally in Indianapolis in April 1948, over 3,000 people heard Ransom, now the party’s state treasurer, introduce Wallace and listened to Robeson sing and speak. Ransom posed for photographs with the happy group. No hotel or restaurant would accommodate them, so Dr. Theodore Cable, a Democratic Party leader, hosted a reception at his home on West Street.⁶⁷ At the new party’s state convention two months later, Ransom accepted the nomination as candidate for Congress from Indiana’s Eleventh District. His campaign broadside presented him as “First Negro to Run for Congress in Indiana.” From the New York office,

⁶³ *Indianapolis Recorder*, April 3, 1948.

⁶⁴ *Indianapolis Star*, January 23, 1947.

⁶⁵ *Indianapolis Recorder*, February 1, 1947; *Indianapolis Star*, January 24, 1947. No Indianapolis hotel would accept the Shelbyville High School basketball team when it played in the 1947 state tournament because there were three African American players on the roster. Tom Graham and Rachel Graham Cody, *Getting Open: The Unknown Story of Bill Garrett and the Integration of College Basketball* (New York), 55–58.

⁶⁶ Martin Bauml Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (New York, 1988), esp. 316–35; *Muncie Star Press*, June 3, 1948; Pierce interview, July 26, 1994. Ransom doubtless appreciated Eslanda Goode Robeson as a leading activist in civil rights, peace, and anti-colonialism. Jacqueline Castledine, *Cold War Progressives: Women’s Interracial Organizing for Peace and Freedom* (Champaign, Ill., 2012), 86–109.

⁶⁷ *Indianapolis News*, April 8, 1948; *Indianapolis Recorder*, April 17, 1948.



Mike Ransom standing, back row, center, with 1948 Progressive Party presidential candidate Henry Wallace to his right and political activist and singer Paul Robeson to Wallace's right.

Courtesy: Judy Ransom-Lewis.

anxious NAACP officials warned him that his unwise political choice had “hampered our work somewhat in Indiana.”⁶⁸

⁶⁸ *Indianapolis Recorder*, June 26, 1948; Current to Ransom, October 27, 1948. II: C58, NAACP Papers.

As NAACP leaders moved into the anticommunist camp, they united in fall 1948 to oust Du Bois, who they thought too radical and too independent. Ransom greatly admired Du Bois and sent a blistering protest to the New York office, claiming that the charge of insubordination was only a cover-up for the leadership's support of Truman.⁶⁹ Ransom was so upset that he convinced the Indianapolis branch to reject the official nominating slate for national board members, which they did, and then proceeded to support Ransom as the Indianapolis nominee. By late 1948, however, some within the branch and state NAACP thought Ransom was becoming too radical. Still, statewide respect for his commitment and ability led delegates to the annual state conference in December to reelect him as president. And in a jab at the national leadership, delegates also elected him as Indiana's choice for the national board. Ransom continued to challenge the national leadership, particularly Walter White, who he thought vain, conservative, and out of touch with grass-roots African Americans.⁷⁰

Ransom spoke at the Progressive Party's 1948 national convention in Philadelphia and lashed out at "hypocrites" in both parties, as he predicted a "gathering storm of progressive democracy that shall sweep America."⁷¹ Back in Indiana, he praised the two major parties for moving away from segregation but asserted that their moderate programs were mere expedients to win crucial African American votes. Hoosier voters rejected the Progressive Party. In the congressional race, Ransom's Democratic opponent won over 100,000 votes to his 1,076. The great majority of Indianapolis African Americans voted Democratic, the *Recorder* concluded.⁷²

Ransom probably lacked the luxury of quiet reflection in these intense days. Henry Richardson wrote Thurgood Marshall that "Poor Ransom is spreading himself so thin, I doubt he knows whether he is pitching or catching."⁷³ If Ransom had stopped to look backward in early 1949, he would have contemplated one of the busiest and most challenging years in his life. He had managed a revival of NAACP branches across the state, led numerous protests and rallies against segregation in public accommodations, worked on piles of legal cases, and led the planning that challenged school segregation in

⁶⁹ Carol Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1955* (Cambridge, Eng., 2003), 145–46.

⁷⁰ *Indianapolis Recorder*, October 16, 1948, December 4, 11, 1949, October 20, 1949, July 1, 1950.

⁷¹ *Indianapolis Recorder*, July 31, 1948.

⁷² *Indianapolis Recorder*, October 16, November 6, 1948.

⁷³ Henry Richardson to Marshall, February 4, 1949, II: C58, NAACP Papers.

Indianapolis and across the state. He had jumped into the Progressive Party, opening him to the charge of communism and pushing him to challenge the leadership of the national NAACP. It was a transitional year, one with long-term benefits and one that would prove personally damaging.

It was soon clear that the “militant young war veteran,” as the *Indianapolis Recorder* described him, had gone too far in a place that preferred slow, evolutionary change. He continued his quiet, behind-the-scenes work to smooth the way for African Americans, but his public talks were more militant as he attacked both parties for failing to deliver on their promises. “The temper of the Negro people is that we want civil rights NOW,” he told a large Indianapolis audience.⁷⁴ Even after political defeat in 1948 and growing anticommunist attacks, Ransom continued to work for the Progressive Party. He was reelected to the national board in 1950 and served as Indiana chairman in the 1952 campaign, when he invited Du Bois to be keynote speaker at the party’s Indianapolis kickoff. He also stayed close to Robeson, who the *Indianapolis News* identified as “a member of no fewer than 11 Communist fronts.” At the party’s Chicago convention in 1952, Ransom followed Du Bois and Robeson to the stage and cheered as the convention delegates approved a very tough civil rights platform.⁷⁵

In 1948, Ransom had also become Indianapolis co-chair of a new organization, the Civil Rights Congress. This small left-wing group was an alternative vehicle to exert pressure in Indiana’s school desegregation fights and a way for Ransom to express his frustration with the caution of the NAACP. It was a risky step, because the CRC had significant communist membership and was eventually listed by the House Un-American Activities Committee as a communist front organization. Ransom nonetheless continued to speak publicly for CRC’s legal work. In one interview in 1949 he spoke of “collectivism” as a response to economic depressions and unemployment, but there is no reason to suspect that he was ever a communist of any sort.⁷⁶

Some claimed he was. The *Indianapolis News* informed readers in early 1950 that “a trail of tell-tale clues drips from a Communist. . . . He

⁷⁴ *Indianapolis Recorder*, December 4, 1948, January 14, 1950.

⁷⁵ *Indianapolis Recorder*, March 4, 1950, July 7, 1952; *Indianapolis News*, May 26, 1952; *Logansport Press*, August 31, 1952.

⁷⁶ *Indianapolis News*, February 22, 1950; *Indianapolis Recorder*, January 28, 1951. See also Charles H. Martin, “The Civil Rights Congress and Southern Black Defendants,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 71 (Spring 1987), 25–52; Gerald Horne, *Communist Front? The Civil Rights Congress, 1946–1956* (Rutherford, N. J., 1988).

may appear in Indianapolis as a 'progressive'. Sometimes he's a defender of 'civil rights' in Gary or maybe a citizen of 'world peace' in Fort Wayne." All three telltale clues fit Ransom. In its final sentence, the *News* article specifically named him and the Civil Rights Congress.⁷⁷

By speaking in South Bend, Gary, and Indianapolis at gatherings of the Civil Rights Congress and the Progressive Party, Ransom received growing criticism from within the NAACP. The director of Indiana branches, F. Douglas Coker, wrote from South Bend to complain to Roy Wilkins that Ransom's work was drawing strength away from the local NAACP and that he was associating with communists. The president of the Gary branch, Edna Morris, a French teacher at segregated Roosevelt High School, chastised Ransom for agreeing to speak at a rally without consulting her, a rally that highlighted his Progressive Party ties and included on the program Eslanda Robeson. The Gary teacher then wrote the national office to complain that Ransom was splitting the NAACP: "the more sensible and cultured groups—both white and Negro—congratulate the NAACP on its calm and gradual approach—but these radicals ruin everything we start to do." In Indianapolis, Ransom chaired the program in which the Progressive Party and the Civil Rights Congress cooperated to bring Eslanda Robeson to speak to some 500 people, followed by a reception at the Ransom home. A sympathetic NAACP member wrote the *Recorder* to complain that Indianapolis newspapers were branding "anyone a communist who is openly fighting for identical rights for colored people with those of any other people. Attorney Willard Ransom is the local target, and Mr. Paul Robeson is the national target."⁷⁸

As the Red Scare intensified, anti-Ransom forces gained strength close to home. Within weeks after the great victory that Ransom and Richardson had won with the 1949 school desegregation law, Richardson complained to Marshall that "the N.A.A.C.P. affairs here have been perverted and converted by Wallace followers, stamped Reds, under the leadership of Mike Ransom."⁷⁹

⁷⁷ *Indianapolis News*, February 21, 1950.

⁷⁸ F. Douglas Coker to Wilkins, August 17, 1949, II: C57, NAACP Papers; Edna Morris to Ransom, October 3, 1949; Morris to Current, October 4, 1949, II: C54, NAACP Papers; *Indianapolis Recorder*, April 4, 21, 1950; Cary D. Jacobs to Editor, *Indianapolis Recorder*, March 25, 1950. Some NAACP leaders feared they were "being 'swallowed up' by the Civil Rights Congress." Coker to Current, September 23, 1948, II: C57, NAACP Papers.

⁷⁹ Richardson to Marshall, May 5, 1949, II: B137, NAACP Papers. The two Indianapolis lawyers had an uneasy relationship. Richardson criticized Ransom's legal skills in a letter to Marshall.

Such attacks on Ransom arose as the NAACP struggled with challenges that included growing white resistance to Truman's civil rights initiatives, discontent from branches that wanted to push harder against segregation, a weakened national leadership centered on declining confidence in Walter White, and the heightening fears of the Red Scare. In a cautious response to anticommunist attacks, the New York office decided to exclude left-wing organizations from a civil rights rally in Washington, D. C., in January 1950 (a rally Ransom and dozens of Hoosiers attended). At the 1950 national convention, delegates approved a resolution to investigate those branches that might have allowed communist infiltration. Ransom was furious. He issued a public statement protesting the exclusion of any group: "the NAACP cannot set itself up as judge and jury to decide who shall participate in the democratic rights of our country."⁸⁰ At this moment, as historian Thomas J. Sugrue has written, "the specter of anticommunism irrevocably altered the grassroots culture of the organization."⁸¹

At the grassroots in Indiana, support for Ransom remained sufficient for him to win reelection as state NAACP president in late 1949, but in a split vote of 19–10. The following year, at the annual meeting in Evansville, the nominating committee struck his name from the ballot as they claimed his support of the Progressive Party was harming the organization. Joining in that position was Gloster Current, national branch director. A vigorous floor fight followed, but Ransom won reelection, 25–15. Six days after the Evansville meeting, his opponents in the Indianapolis branch rose up and voted him off the board. The *Indianapolis Recorder* labeled it a "purge" and the "most dramatic development in local NAACP affairs since the ouster of Lowell M. Trice." Ransom's support of the Progressive Party and the Civil Rights Congress, along with his criticism of the national office, were the reasons given. A few days later, the branch board met at the home of the president, Jessie Jacobs, one meeting Mike Ransom did not go to. One bright spot that Christmas season was the dropping of voter fraud charges brought against the local Progressive Party in the fall election. And in the

Ransom later called Richardson "a flamboyant type lawyer." Richardson to Marshall, February 19, 1949, II: B137, NAACP Papers; Hale interview, December 5, 1990, p. 33.

⁸⁰ Joint statement of Ransom and Johnson, January 11, 1950, II: C55, NAACP. See also, *Indianapolis Recorder*, January 14, 1950; Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*, 370–75; Yvonne Ryan, *Roy Wilkins: The Quiet Revolutionary and the NAACP* (Lexington, Ky., 2014), 38–50.

⁸¹ Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 106.

new year, the *Recorder* again named Ransom to its Race Relations Honor Roll, the only person to be named twice.⁸²

Attacks continued. At the 1951 Indiana annual meeting, the largest in the state's history, Ransom eked out a victory in a hard floor fight by a vote of 32–27. Finally, at the annual meeting in Fort Wayne in October 1952, he lost the presidency. He would never again assume a leadership role in the state and nation's most important civil rights organization.⁸³

The Red Scare eventually “turned him off politics,” his daughter recalled.⁸⁴ But Ransom did not surrender his position on the left. When in 1951 the government indicted his hero, Du Bois, Ransom sent him a handwritten note praising him for “the fight for freedom of the Negro people [that] will live long after the timid opportunists and blatant reactionaries have passed from the scene.”⁸⁵ He joined in seeking clemency for the convicted spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, causing more embarrassment to Hoosier colleagues.⁸⁶ His successor as state president, Jessie Jacobs, lamented to the national office that NAACP enemies labeled them a “red outfit” and added, “This red rumor on Ransom seemed not to affect the state NAACP but it did seem to have weight here in Indianapolis among non-NAACP people.”⁸⁷ A Fort Wayne branch leader claimed that “Many members did not renew their membership this year expressing the fear that the NAACP might be branded subversive.”⁸⁸ At the state meeting of the Veterans of Foreign Wars in 1952, an NAACP member from Kokomo denounced communists and called out Ransom by name.⁸⁹ By end of 1954, the South Bend branch reported “new heights of community respect and acceptance” due partly to the Brown school desegregation decision but also to the “complete elimination of left-wing infiltration . . . of the local branch.”⁹⁰

⁸² *Indianapolis Recorder*, December 10, 16 (quote), 23, 1950, January 7, 1951. Ransom had been arrested in the 1950 campaign and charged with voter fraud in submitting invalid signatures to get the Progressive Party on the ballot. He claimed it was a frame-up. *Indianapolis Recorder*, October 28, 1950.

⁸³ *Indianapolis Recorder*, December 9, 1950, November 10, 1951, October 25, 1952.

⁸⁴ Ransom-Lewis interview.

⁸⁵ Ransom to W. E. B. Du Bois, [n.d. 1951?], W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

⁸⁶ Melvin S. Baird to State Board, March 6, 1953, II: C58, NAACP Papers.

⁸⁷ Jessie Jacobs to White and Current, n.d. [December, 1952], II: A548, NAACP Papers.

⁸⁸ Corrine Brooks to Current, August 20, 1954, II: C54, NAACP Papers.

⁸⁹ *Kokomo Tribune*, June 21, 1952.

⁹⁰ Black to Current, December 13, 1954, II: C57, NAACP Papers.

In 1963, more than a decade after Ransom's purge, Andrew W. Ramsey, a foreign language teacher at Attucks, long-time NAACP activist, and columnist for the *Recorder*, looked back on Ransom's leadership:

He was labeled a 'radical' and a 'trouble-maker' by many of the spokesmen of the local power structure and when he deserted the Democratic Party to support Henry Wallace in 1948, he was subjected to not only name calling but economic reprisals and social ostracism. Members of the power structure black-listed him and many Negroes who had known him all of his life took a cue from the opinion makers and ostracized him from their affairs and used him as an excuse for not joining the NAACP.⁹¹

Ransom remained firm in rejecting a cautious route forward. "The most effective way to break discrimination in public places in Indiana is through a mass, direct action campaign, utilizing educational techniques and legal action at the same time," he wrote one of the younger NAACP lawyers in the New York office in 1952. And he added, "this technique requires an NAACP leadership that is militant and unafraid. I believe that the great curse of the NAACP is middle-class, upper bracket leadership."⁹² To another young NAACP lawyer that same year, Ransom suggested that "the people are way ahead of the lawmakers." (It is notable that Ransom wrote these letters to two of the newest lawyers working with Marshall in the New York office.)⁹³

Ransom was ahead of the NAACP and ahead of his times. The Red Scare was the spark to his downfall. Without the anticommunist attacks he might have continued in leadership positions and risen even higher on the basis of his intelligence, commitment, and personal style. He knew his chosen path was risky, but perhaps in his passion for change he underestimated not only the virulence of anticommunism but also the strength

⁹¹ Andrew W. Ramsey in *Indianapolis Recorder*, November 2, 1963. Ramsey for three decades wrote a very insightful column in the *Recorder*. One historian has written that "the quietism and apathy displayed by many African Americans often exasperated Ramsey." Modupe Labode, "A 'Voice from the Gallery': Andrew Ramsey and School Desegregation in Indianapolis," *Ohio Valley History* 14 (Fall 2014), 33.

⁹² Ransom to Jack Greenberg, July 28, 1952, II: C58, NAACP Papers.

⁹³ Ransom to June Shagaloff, December 5, 1952, Legal Defense and Education Fund Papers, II: 134, NAACP Papers.

of moderation, conservatism, and fear in his city and state. Hoosiers had nearly always mistrusted disruptive challengers.

And always there was race. White Hoosiers moved toward support for civil rights after 1945 and even joined NAACP branches in Indianapolis and elsewhere, but in small numbers.⁹⁴ African American Hoosiers had many reasons to be cautious, knowing full well the deep current of racial animosity that ran through Indiana's history. In later interviews Ransom recalled with regret and even a touch of uncharacteristic bitterness that some of the most visible leaders of the African American community did not publicly support him. His colleague at the Madam Walker Company, Robert Brokenburr, worked for civil rights but often behind the scenes in a modest way. The *Indianapolis Recorder*, he thought, too often did not have sufficient "fire." It bothered him that some black churches and ministers were so cautious. One minister accosted him on the street outside the Walker Building to address him as "young man" and complain that "you're just too radical."⁹⁵

Many African Americans feared that protest would cause retaliation, particularly in employment, exacerbating tendencies to moderation. Such fears were real. Ransom's wife and sister-in-law lost their jobs, he believed, because of his public activism. Everyone knew that most employers were still reluctant to open a good job to an African American, even to one qualified and judged well-mannered. Ransom understood also that he had a more privileged position than most blacks. His Harvard law degree often provided some protection and credibility, including with some white lawyers. He knew also that it was "difficult to get at the lawyer in terms of reprisals. . . . He's a slippery eel," and "not under anybody's thumb."⁹⁶

Civil rights activists during the 1950s encountered conservative administrations in the state house and in Washington and a continuing fear of communism that hampered the movement. Indiana's NAACP branches drifted from aggressive protest toward moderate persuasion. Sometimes, the leadership expressed justified satisfaction about progress achieved, and sometimes a smug optimism that focused on a glass only half full. In his annual report for 1950, director of Indiana branches F. Douglas Coker (one of Ransom's antagonists) reported that "the bars in public accommodations are falling like leaves in Autumn."⁹⁷ Progress occurred, to be sure,

⁹⁴ Jacobs to Black, December 16, 1950, Ransom to Current, August 28, 1952, II: C58, NAACP Papers.

⁹⁵ Hale interview, December 5, 1990, pp. 2, 43; *Indianapolis News*, November 11, 1949.

⁹⁶ Stone interview, July 18, 1983, p. 19.

⁹⁷ Coker, annual report for 1950, II: C58, NAACP Papers.

but bars never fell fast enough for Ransom. Doubtless he knew that as late as 1960 the great baseball player Jackie Robinson was turned away from an Indianapolis hotel. A year later Bill Russell and several other black Boston Celtics basketball players were refused service in a Marion restaurant. The *Negro Motorist Green Book*, a travel guide offering “assured protection for the Negro traveler,” still appeared in annual editions into the 1960s. The Indiana pages listed a few welcoming hotels and restaurants in Indianapolis and across the state from Angola to West Baden.⁹⁸

Ransom continued to go to meetings and to speak to groups about the slow pace of school integration and the bars to employment and housing. His NAACP colleagues knew well his legal talents and convinced him to head the state organization’s Legal Redress Committee. This work took him to Terre Haute in 1955, for example, to work on desegregating local theaters and labor unions. He also joined the suit filed against the city of Marion, which maintained a segregated public swimming pool, a case the NAACP won in federal court. It was important work, but not the leadership he had provided in the late 1940s.⁹⁹

In 1958, Mike Ransom and his family left their Indiana Avenue neighborhood and moved to a house on Grandview Drive, in a suburban community of mostly middle-class African American families, the first such outside the city limits. Gladys had to learn to drive. The move to the suburbs did not prevent Ransom from taking a leadership role in the 1970s in efforts to rejuvenate the old Indiana Avenue neighborhood.¹⁰⁰

In the early 1960s, he returned to the political arena, back in the Democratic Party. More Americans were grasping the meaning of the escalating civil rights movements, not just in the South but in South Bend, Indianapolis, and Evansville. A coalition of labor, religious, and political leaders provided organizational structures. At a critical moment, Matthew Welsh won the governor’s office. Ransom worked hard in Welsh’s 1960 campaign because, he recalled, “his attitudes were entirely different from

⁹⁸ Thornbrough, “Breaking Racial Barriers,” 316; Madison, *A Lynching in the Heartland*, 178. See also Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 102–111; *The Travelers’ Green Book* (1960), 38–39, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division, The New York Public Library, New York Public Library Digital Collections.

⁹⁹ Ransom to Herbert Hill, March 30, April 26, October 24, 1955, II: A344, NAACP Papers; *Indianapolis Recorder*, July 24, 1954; Thornbrough, “Breaking Racial Barriers,” 324–31; Madison, *A Lynching in the Heartland*, 130–37.

¹⁰⁰ Ransom-Lewis interview; Bundles, *On Her Own Ground*, 18; David J. Bodenhamer and Robert G. Barrows, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Indianapolis* (Bloomington, Ind., 1994), 11; *Indianapolis News*, September 23, 1970, January 9, 1980.

PLEASE MENTION "THE GREEN BOOK"

Indiana
Iowa

ELKHART
TOURIST HOMES
 Miss E. Botts—336 St. Joe St.

EVANSVILLE
TOURIST HOMES
 Mrs. B. Bell—672 Lincoln Ave.
 Mrs. Lauderdale—309 Locust St.
 Miss F. Snow—719 Oak St.
 Community Ass'n—620 Cherry St.

FORT WAYNE
RESTAURANTS
 Leo Manuals—1329 Lafayette St.
 Stewart's—621 E. Brackenridge St.
 Martin & Rankin—1329 S. Lafayette St.

TOURIST HOMES
 Mrs. Ben Talbot—456 E. Douglas

BARBER SHOPS
 William's—1116 Eliza

BEAUTY PARLORS
 Service—1408 S. Hanna St.

GARY
HOTELS
 States—1700 Washington St.

FRENCH LICK
HOTELS
 Thurman—222 Indiana Ave.

INDIANAPOLIS
HOTELS
 Y. M. C. A.—450 N. Senate Ave.
 Y. W. C. A.—653 N. West St.
 Ferguson—1102 N. Capitol Ave.
 Marquis—1523 N. Capitol Avenue
 Hawaii—406 Indiana Ave.
 Zanzibar—420 N. Senate Ave.

RESTAURANTS
 Lasley's—510 Indiana Ave.
 A. B.'s—413 Indiana Ave.
 Broaden's—1645 N. Western Ave.
 Parkview—321 N. California Ave.
 Stormy Weather—319 Indiana Ave.
 Log Cabin—524 Indiana Ave.

CHINESE RESTAURANTS
 Yee Sen—545 Indiana

BEAUTY PARLORS
 Stephens & Childs—527 Indiana Ave.
 Beauty Box—2704 Clifton St.
 Dancy's—436 N. California Ave.
 Smith's—446 Douglas St.

TAVERNS
 Mayes Cafe—503 Indiana
 Ritz—Senate & Indiana
 Sunset—875 Indiana
 M. C.—544 W. Maryland St.
 Blue Eagle—648 Indiana
 Midway—736 Indiana
 Panama—306 Indiana

SERVICE STATIONS
 Harris—458 West 16th St.

GARAGES
 25th Street Garage—560 W. 25th St.

DRUG STORES
 Ethical—642 Indiana

TAILORS
 Neighborhood—1642 Northwestern Ave.
 Lee's—401 W. 29th St.

JEFFERSONVILLE
TOURIST HOMES
 Charles Thomas—607 Missouri Ave.
 Leonard Redd—711 Missouri Ave.

MARION
RESTAURANTS
 Marshall's—414 E. 4th St.

KOKOMO
TOURIST HOMES
 Mrs. C. W. Winburn—1015 Kennedy St.
 Mrs. Charles Hardinson—812 Kennedy St.
 Mrs. S. D. Hughes—1045 N. Kennedy St.

LAFAYETTE
TAVERNS
 Pekin Cafe—1702 Hartford St.

MICHIGAN CITY
TOURIST HOMES
 Allen's—210 E. 2nd St.

MUNCIE
HOTELS
 Y. M. C. A.—900 S. Madison

SOUTH BEND
RESTAURANTS
 Smokes—432 S. Chapin St.

TERRE HAUTE
HOTELS
 Booker—33½ No. 3rd St.

WEST BADEN SPRINGS
HOTELS
 Waddy

EVANSVILLE
TOURIST HOMES
 Z. Knight—410 S. E. 9th St.

IOWA
CEDAR RAPIDS
TOURIST HOMES
 Mrs. W. H. Lavelle—812 9th Ave. E.
 Brown's—818 9th Ave. S. E.

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A page from the *Negro Motorist Green Book, An International Travel Guide 1949*, showing restaurants, hotels, and other businesses where African American travelers would be welcomed.

Courtesy: The Collections of The Henry Ford.



The civil rights movement was blossoming in 1963, represented by the NAACP Freedom March in Indianapolis. Although no longer in an NAACP leadership position, Mike Ransom helped organize this and other civil rights activities in the early 1960s.

Courtesy: Indianapolis Recorder Collection, Indiana Historical Society.

previous governors.” Welsh genuinely believed in civil rights, Ransom concluded. Soon after the inauguration in early 1961, Ransom organized a rally of some 300 demonstrators at the state house to support the new governor’s civil rights program. He helped draft Welsh’s two path-breaking bills, one passed in 1961, the second in 1963. Especially important was the 1963 law which finally opened restaurants, hotels, movie theaters, and other public accommodations to all Hoosiers and also took a small step toward fair employment. In a departure from the Indiana way of governing, the state moved ahead of the nation in passage of significant, progressive legislation. Welsh led in other ways, as in providing financial support to celebrate the centennial of emancipation with a Century of Negro Progress Exposition. Ransom chaired the committee that planned the event at the Indiana State Fairgrounds. Welsh cut the ribbon, the Attucks band marched, and the head of Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce praised progress toward equality in the city.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Hale interview, January 23, 1991, pp. 51–57; *Logansport Press*, February 10, 1961, October 26, 1963; Matthew E. Welsh, *View from the State House: Recollections and Reflections, 1961–1965* (Indianapolis, 1981), 94–95, 191–97; Pierce, *Polite Protest*, 105–106; Thornbrough, “Breaking Racial Barriers,” 330–43; Thornbrough, *Indiana Blacks in the Twentieth Century*, 167–74; Madison,

Ransom found new ways to support his family in the 1970s. One came at a lunch meeting with Harry Ice, a leading Indianapolis lawyer. Ice invited him to join the board of Merchants National Bank, perhaps the first African American to sit on an Indianapolis bank board. At a meeting in 1971, fellow Harvard law alumnus Charles Feibleman invited him to join Bamberger and Feibleman, known in the city as “the Jewish law firm.” Hiring Ransom, probably the first black lawyer in an Indianapolis premier firm, was a bit risky but also “good for business,” one of his colleagues later recalled.¹⁰² These two appointments reflected changing times and a respect Ransom had earned in his home town. Both gave him an opportunity, he remembered, to use “the good-old-boy network . . . to do some things.” He focused particularly on helping African Americans and women in the workplace, claiming in 1991 that businesses were “even slower” in hiring and promoting women “than they are blacks.”¹⁰³ Hometown profiles in these last decades of the century presented an elder statesman with scant recognition of the sharp edges that in the late 1940s had attracted labels like “radical” and “red.”¹⁰⁴

Ransom continued to push on jobs, education, and housing and to regret the moderation that had long been his nemesis. In 1975, when an Indianapolis white police officer shot and killed an African American suspect, Ransom sent a strongly worded complaint to Mayor Richard Lugar of “improper training” of a “racist police force.” In an interview in 1991 he lamented that “The NAACP now is, I think, gotten a little bit too, shall we call it, fat and satisfied, and needs to get a little more militant again.”¹⁰⁵ He died in 1995 knowing that his city and state still struggled with discrimination and segregation, sometimes more subtle, but always frustrating to those who believed in American ideals.

Ransom never became a bitter old man. He continued hopeful and with love for his family. He was the proud father when his daughter Judy

“Race, Law, and the Burdens of Indiana History,” 54–55. By the twenty-first century, Indiana’s civil rights law was far less progressive than most other states. Kevin W. Betz, “Civil Rights Laws Weak in Indiana,” *Indianapolis Star*, January 11, 2018.

¹⁰² Author interview with Gene Wilkins, November 6, 2017. Wilkins recalled Ransom working with Alex Haley, author of *Roots*, to create a television program about Madam Walker to use as a fundraiser for the Walker Building.

¹⁰³ Hale interview, January 30, 1991, pp. 56, 58, February 20, 1991, p. 9.

¹⁰⁴ *Indianapolis Star*, February 23, 1991.

¹⁰⁵ Ransom to Richard Lugar, telegram, May 20, 1975, Richard G. Lugar Collection, Digital Mayoral Archives, University of Indianapolis; Hale interview, January 30, 1991, p. 29.

graduated from Spelman College and his son from Harvard Law School, where young Philip Freeman Ransom wore a dashiki at his commencement.¹⁰⁶

America's best-known civil rights stories feature heroes such as Martin Luther King Jr. and remarkable events such as the Selma March. Such highly visible points in the nation's history are significant. Yet, the civil rights movement consisted of many actions by many people at the grassroots level, in the North as well as the South, and beginning long before Selma or the Supreme Court's landmark decision in 1954. These grassroots movements have small places, at best, in history textbooks, monuments, and public memory. Mike Ransom was one of those local people, an example of the best of them in courage, intelligence, and dedication to justice and equality for all. Indianapolis, Indiana, and America changed because citizens like Mike Ransom went to all those meetings.

¹⁰⁶ Ransom-Lewis interview.