



PATTEN'S NEIGHBORHOOD MEMORIES OF THE CENTER STREET COMMUNITY

A STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA EXHIBIT
STATE HISTORICAL BUILDING * 600 EAST LOCUST, DES MOINES, IOWA 50319

Patten's Neighborhood examines African-American life in Des Moines through the work of job printer and salesman Robert E. Patten and his family. Patten hoped to open a museum partly devoted to the history of African-Americans in Des Moines. He intended to display many of the items he printed for the black community, from tickets and posters, to party invitations and family portraits. Patten never opened his museum, but his printed legacy survived to share his story. Supplemented by images from two newspapers printed in Des Moines, **The Iowa Bystander** and **Iowa Sepia News**, this exhibit focuses on black culture and community from the early 1900s to the 1960s when urban renewal and freeway construction destroyed the Center Street neighborhood.

The African American population has never exceeded 5 per cent of Des Moines' overall population. Around 1900, about 1,100 African Americans lived in Des Moines. During World War I, the establishment of the Colored Officers's Training Camp and the introduction of southern black inductees at Camp Dodge sparked an influx of blacks into Des Moines. Many stayed and the black population rose to 5,800 by 1920. This number increased to 6,400 by 1940, 8,200 in 1950, and 10,300 in 1960.

Segregation largely restricted the neighborhoods where the black population could live and work. As more African Americans settled in the Center Street neighborhood, they created a separate, complex and vibrant social world with varied levels of income, education, and social status.

Robert E. Patten (1883-1968), was born and raised in Georgia. He settled in the southern Iowa coal-mining town of Buxton around 1900. A man of strong work ethic, Patten worked in Des Moines before relocating there in 1909. He also traveled around the Midwest selling books and various printed goods. He opened his print and photography shop on 14th Street in the Center Street neighborhood and operated the business in front of his house. As an area Lucky Hearts sales agent, Patten sold the black-owned Memphis, Tennessee company's wide array of perfumes, potions, and food flavorings. Patten also sold various hair preparations, cosmetics, and cleaning products manufactured by the Unecedor Chemical Company of Des Moines.

LOOK FOR THESE ARTIFACTS ON DISPLAY

***Snapper Job Press *Proof Press * Center Street sign *Patten's bicycle
*Lucky Hearts and Uneedor Chemical Co. products *Saxophone**

WORKADAY WORLD

In response to discrimination, African-American Iowans opened and managed their own stores and filled professional and service positions. Most of these businesses were modest family operations serving the neighborhood. This exhibit area showcases Center Street businesses including Edmund's Service Station, Williams Prescription Pharmacy, Square Deal Cleaners & Tailors, Hardaway's Tonsorial Parlor, and the Crescent Beauty School.

FAMILY GATHERINGS

For generations, the family has been the center of black community life. At mid-century, the majority of African-Americans lived in two-parent families, including many households with three generations living together. The number of single-parent homes was small but increasing by the 1950s. This exhibit area includes material produced or sold by Patten for his customers to use in their homes.

JOINING UP

Patten printed material for numerous black social and business organizations including the Monarch Club, Mary Terrell Church Club, and De Luxe Club. These lodges and fraternal clubs, political action groups, and women's organizations served as social and professional contacts and were involved in philanthropy, recreation, and education. This exhibit area illustrates the vibrant and varied nature of community life.

WORSHIPPING PLACES

Churches offered community and personal identity, spiritual guidance, and self respect. Des Moines' black clerics and lay leaders assumed a strong community leadership role - a nationwide trend. Patten's numerous print jobs for many of Des Moines' African-American churches (including the Corinthian, Mt. Olive, Union, and Maple St. Baptist churches, the St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Burns Methodist Church) provide detailed descriptions of the religious community's special events and everyday activities.

CATCHING THE PERFORMANCE

A handful of night clubs and dance halls in the Center Street neighborhood provided entertainment for Des Moines' black community. These night spots, like the Shelburn Garden, Garden Cafe, and the Billiken, allowed patrons to dine, enjoy live music, dance, and listen to comedians. The clubs attracted touring groups of regional and national stature, and gave local acts steady gigs and income. During the 1940s and 1950s, rhythm and blues, jazz, and jazz be-bop flourished. Some of Patten's posters show the influence of minstrel shows and troubadour acts.

BLACK PRIDE

During the 1930s and 1940s, black pride, self-help and recognition events, and memorial activities were popular. Black pride also was fostered through national and local heroes and role models. This exhibit area includes printed material on events sponsored by the NAACP, the Brotherhood and the Sisterhood, the Willkie House, the YWCA, and the YMCA.

DISCOVERY DRAWERS

Open the drawers located at the lower end of the cases
to examine more printed items from the Patten collection.