A TRAILBLAZING BLACK COUPLE IN MINNEAPOLIS HISTORY

GHOST *of a* CHANCE

A GUIDE TO THE NARRATIVE PODCAST

The Minnesota Star Tribune
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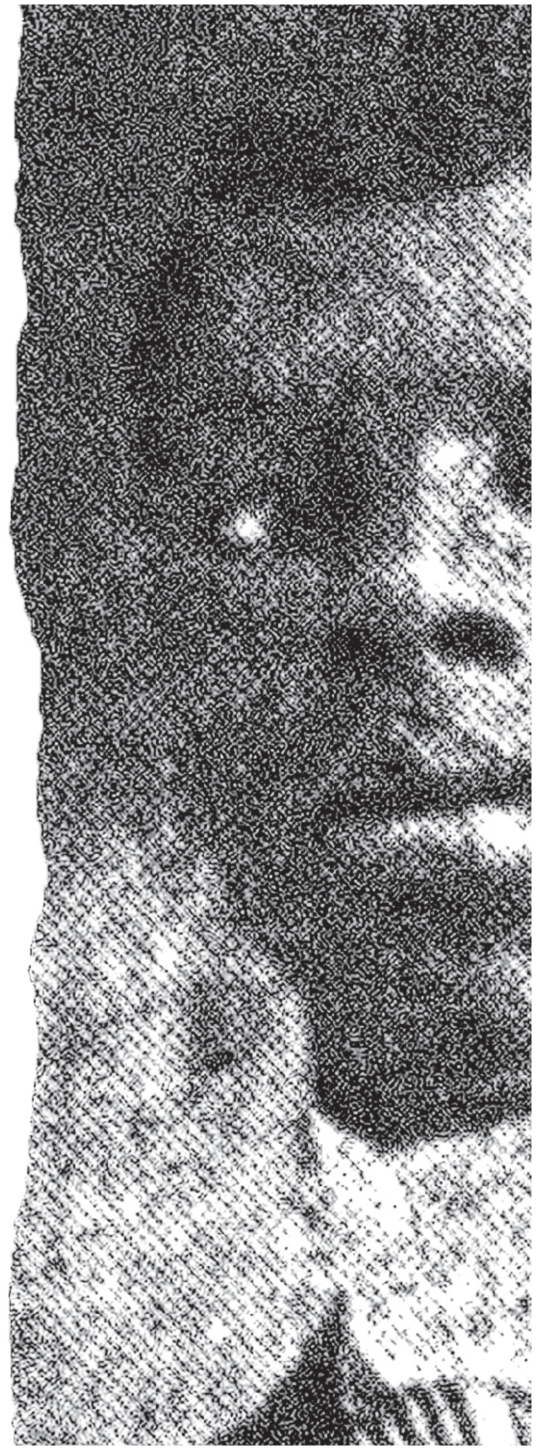
National Advocate via Minnesota Historical Society

Inside



Mitchell Commercial via Indiana University

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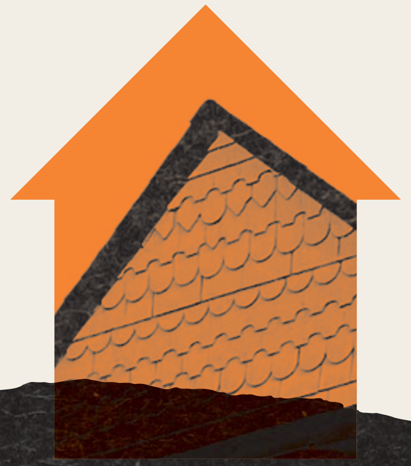
A NARRATIVE PODCAST

A mystery about my house became a five-year project



that delved deep into the history of Minneapolis.

I will never meet Clementine and Harry Robinson, but an old house has connected us across generations.

Essay by ERIC ROPER
Illustration by BROCK KAPLAN
The Minnesota Star Tribune

Let me tell you about my friends, the Robinsons.

At least I like to think of the Robinsons as friends – in some cosmic way. We do share a bathtub.

Harry and Clementine Robinson lived in my southwest Minneapolis home a century ago. They were Black, and their presence in what is now the whitest part of the city was controversial. I learned these facts when my husband and I – who are both white – moved into the house in March 2020.

The pandemic locked us in our 113-year-old home, and I kept thinking about the Robinsons. Who were they? Where did they come from? Where did they end up?

I have been obsessively sleuthing for nearly five years. And I can now finally tell the Robinsons' remarkable story, with audio producer Melissa Townsend, in the Minnesota Star Tribune's first narrative podcast, "Ghost of a Chance." The investigation began as a little mystery about my house, but it ultimately revealed an important history of race in Minneapolis.

Recently digitized Black newspapers allowed me to find granular details about social gatherings and other major events in the Robinsons' lives. These and other digitized records – like city directories – surfaced information that would have been difficult or impossible to find in the past.

I probed census data and other historical information on Ancestry.com. The Robinsons did not have children, but I connected with several of their distant relatives.

To learn about the Robinsons' origin stories, I drove across the Midwest to the small towns in Missouri and Indiana where Clementine and Harry grew up. Local historians were excited to help with the project. The unofficial historian of Clementine's rural hometown shared memories with me for hours at a nursing home, just three months before his death.

I pored over records at the Minnesota History Center, Minneapolis City Hall, Hennepin County Library, the Hennepin County courthouse and even an obscure warehouse of city records in an industrial business park. My fingertips got dirty as I leafed through giant ledger books, and I struggled to remain focused as I scrolled through reels of microfilm.

Many days I found nothing.

Other days brought moments of discovery that gave me a jolt of energy. One find caused me to rise from my chair and exclaim, "Yes!" amid the quiet of the Gale Family Library. My editor and I high-fived when I located a photo of Clementine after three years of searching.

I did not expect that the most significant undertaking of my career would be about race. The topic hadn't been a focus of mine as a journalist.

A little bit about me: I grew up on the Upper East Side of New York City. I have worked for the Star Tribune since I graduated from college in 2009 – and have become a devotee of Minnesota and Minneapolis. My passion for writing about history is how I came to lead our Curious Minnesota project.

I had not spent much time talking or thinking about race, perhaps because my social circle is largely white. I actually bristle at elements of today's culture that reduce people's identity to their race, gender or sexual orientation.

In the wake of George Floyd's murder, I remained quiet as the world scrutinized Minneapolis. The message seemed to be that something was rotten here that had left Black people behind. Police brutality, racial covenants, destructive freeways – a lot had happened in the city. But it also felt like I was being asked to accept an oversimplified narrative about the past.

My curiosity about the Robinsons provided a path for me to investigate the history on my own terms and really dig into the details.

As I pieced together their stories, it became clear that there is a compelling history here. The Robinsons' lives were a window into the injustices that Black people faced in Minnesota, injustices that have been easier to ignore because the state did not have Jim Crow laws. And though we are more enlightened today, this history is still having ripple effects.

Over time, my work grew into a full-blown newsroom endeavor. Melissa Townsend joined the project and spent more than a year transforming my research into a gripping audio series.

We held listening sessions and attended community events to incorporate memories and the feedback of south Minneapolis' Black residents. I left those discussions encouraged by people's openness and generosity.

This journey has also forced me to confront some tough facts about a neighborhood I truly love.

The southwest community of Minneapolis around Lake Harriet is more than 80% white. It came as a surprise to me how intentional the effort was to make it that way. Most notably for the Robinsons, 200 of their neighbors gathered in 1920 to rid that corner of the city of about nine Black families. The meeting was five blocks from the Robinsons' home.

This all happened a long time ago, of course. But the early 20th century was also a key moment when the first generation of Black people born free from slavery could have built wealth and passed it on to future generations. Instead they were held back and hemmed into segregated neighborhoods.

When I presented this project two years ago to then-Star Tribune editor Suki Dardarian, she said she wanted to start a community conversation.

So please give the podcast a listen, and let us know what you think at ghostofachance@startribune.com.

I will never meet the Robinsons, but an old house has connected us across generations. I have peered through the same wavy-glass windows, lain awake at night in the same bedroom, and relaxed in the same claw-foot bathtub.

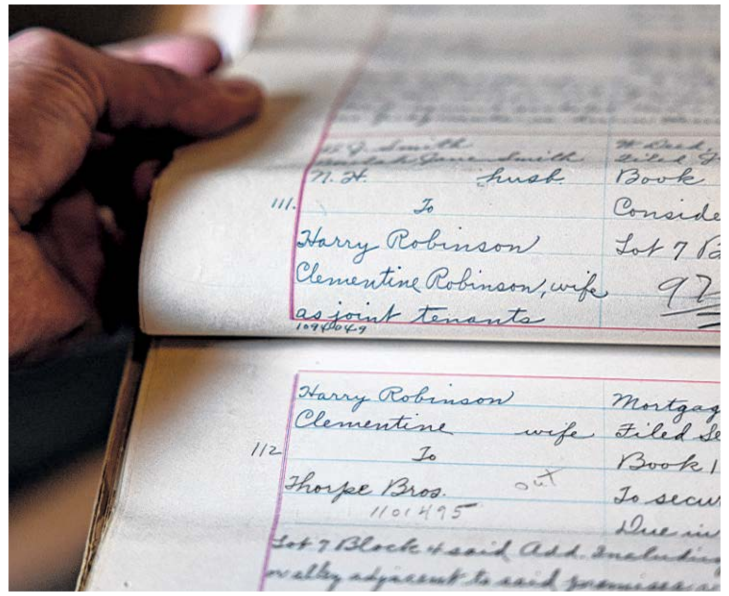
I won't forget about the challenges they endured. I hope you won't, either.

eric.roper@startribune.com

DIGGING DEEP

Eric Roper's quest to find out more about the Robinsons, who lived in his house in south Minneapolis a century ago, led him to newspaper archives, libraries, interviews, cemeteries, government offices and here at a warehouse holding city records. Below, Eric found the Robinsons' names in the abstract of title for his home.

Photos by LEILA NAVIDI, ANGELINA KATSANIS and AYRTON BRECKENRIDGE • The Minnesota Star Tribune



Clementine Robinson

1881 - 1965

A skilled masseuse, Clementine put down roots in Minnesota and made her home a hub for the Black community.

By ERIC ROPER
The Minnesota Star Tribune

National Advocate via Minnesota Historical Society

She worked wonders with her hands.

Massaging deep into muscle tissue, Clementine Robinson knew how to alleviate the knots brought on by the stresses of the world. Her talents as a masseuse earned her a sizable clientele.

They were largely white. She was Black.

That was an important distinction in 1920s Minneapolis, when Clementine and her husband, Harry, were putting down roots in a part of the city that did not want them living there. The woman known for her massages likely felt her own shoulders tense as she navigated that unfair environment.

But Clementine did more than stay put in southwest Minneapolis. She made her home there a social hub for the city's Black elite, showing her white neighbors an image of respectability. Beneath the veneer of dinner parties and club meetings was a serious – if subtle – civil rights message.

Why take the risk? Perhaps it was instilled in her at a young age back in rural Mecca, Mo. Clementine Brown and her 17 siblings were among the first in their family born free from slavery in America. They could get an education and seek out opportunities in a way their parents could not, a freedom that may have come with a nudge to reach as far as possible.

This wasn't just any family, either.

The Northwestern Bulletin-Appeal newspaper would later write that it was "one of the oldest and most respected families in Missouri" – likely because Clementine's grandfather was a pre-emancipation settler of the community. Clementine's father, William, was a minister of the Black Baptist church.

Despite receiving post-secondary education, Clementine had limited employment options in Kansas City. She began her adult life as a domestic servant in a city where racial tensions were on the rise. Her brother Gideon got a medical degree and became a leader of the city's Black hospitals. But Clementine – or "Clemma," as she was sometimes known – sought a better life in the North.

In her mid-20s, she hatched a plan with a young man named Harry Robinson to start anew in Minnesota. Soon, she had learned the finer points of beauty work and found clients among the wealthy wives of industrialists living on the east end of Duluth. She arranged their hair, gave them manicures, and massaged their hands and faces.

She had a knack for massage. After moving to Minneapolis, Clementine used her skills as a masseuse to land a job at St. Barnabas Hospital with a prominent and eccentric doctor, Robert Emmett Farr. "Does this hurt?" she may have asked in the hospital rooms as she gently worked the wounds of Farr's surgery patients to promote healing.

Approaching 40 years old, Clementine was heralded in the Black press for having "charge of a special work" at the hospital and "making a record for herself and race among the wealthy residents, who have never before employed colored women."

She and Harry soon had their eyes on a modest, decade-old house in southwest Minneapolis, surrounded by white neighbors – save for the Bryant family a block away. They bought it, and the large gatherings began almost immediately (as when 16 people crammed into the house for dinner on Christmas Day, 1917).

"Mr. and Mrs. Robinson have one of the most beautiful homes in Minneapolis," the National Advocate newspaper reported in 1920, the same year the Robinsons' white neighbors began mobilizing to oust Black people from the area. "We wish this happy couple success in life."

By 1927, the Pittsburgh Courier called Clementine "one of the best known masseuse[s] in the Mill City." But behind the scenes, finances were growing shakier. Then the Depression yanked it all away, leaving the Robinsons back at square one.

They made a new life as renters in a community taking shape nearby, one of the few neighborhoods not off-limits to Black people. There was plenty of joy still, and social activity. Clementine helped organize a new chapter of the Order of the Eastern Star, and became involved in a local chapter of the Council of Negro Women.

But now Harry was ill, and he couldn't shake the ailment. It took nearly two decades for them to take a chance on buying another house. This one was a bit closer to St. Peter's AME Church, where Clementine grew active in the Helpers Club.

A young neighbor recalled decades later that, as an elderly woman, Clementine meticulously arranged items in her outdoor gardens to show that this was *her* home. And when she sat down to plan for her death, she requested a headstone to commemorate her life.

She didn't get one. There was no money to pay for it.

Clementine Robinson died on June 22, 1965, at age 84. She had no children. But Clementine had grown close to a neighbor girl who ran errands for her. That girl admired Clementine's diamond ring.

In one of her final acts, Clementine bequeathed her ring to the girl next door.

MRS. C. ROBINSON
FUNERAL SERVICES
FRIDAY, JUNE 25

Funeral services were held on Friday evening at 8 p.m., June 25 for Mrs. Clementine Robinson formerly of 213 E. 40th St., Minneapolis at the funeral chapel at 19th and Hennepin with Rev. Noah L. Smith, assistant pastor at St. Peter's A M E church, officiating. Eastern Star services was held by Electa Chapter No. 3 Order of the Eastern Star.

Mrs. Robinson was the widow of the late Harry Brown. She had worked many years as a masseur She was a member of St. Peter's AME church and was a member of the Helper's club. Besides her church affiliation she was a member of Electa Chapter No. 3 OES PHA.

After becoming ill she had been confined to the Eagles boarding home. She died on Tuesday, June 22 at Mt. Sinai hospital.

Survivors are sister, Mrs. Hatthew Washington, Kansas City, Mo., and a nephew Leon Brown, West Des Moines, Iowa.

Interment was in Crystal Lake cemetery.

A LONG LIFE
Clementine Robinson moved to Minnesota in her mid-20s and lived to be 84. Her obituary ran in the Minneapolis Spokesman on July 1, 1965. It noted her affiliation with St. Peter's AME church in Minneapolis and the Order of the Eastern Star.

Harry Robinson

1881 - 1959

Lauded by the Black press as a "pioneer resident," Harry found setbacks and success in his adopted city of Minneapolis.

By ERIC ROPER
The Minnesota Star Tribune

Mitchell Commercial via Indiana University

The Little Dixie Sandwich Shop was festooned with flowers as Harry Robinson prepared for his guests to arrive. This was his moment.

After years toiling as a waiter and a chef in restaurants – some of the only jobs available to a Black man in 1920s Minneapolis – Harry had opened a chicken restaurant on Lake Street. And on that Sunday evening in 1925, a network of Black leaders in the city was gathering for a meal there to celebrate the achievement of this "race man," as one newspaper described Harry.

It probably wasn't an accident that the prominent group met first at the Robinson home – the one in a white neighborhood where neighbors were trying to oust Black residents. Harry and his wife, Clementine, were bold, and their community was cheering them on.

At 44, Harry was finally making a life for himself amid the prejudices of Minnesota. But it probably wasn't the life he'd envisioned as a teenager back in Indiana, after his years of hard work in high school earned him a scholarship to law school.

That graduation day in June 1900 was a triumph for a young man who had witnessed his father's tragic death just a decade earlier. Harry's mother – a former slave – watched him receive the honors after the town band greeted the class with the upbeat "New Century March." What would this new century hold for Harry?

The law school revoked the scholarship because he was Black. Perhaps Harry realized then that the American dream would come at a higher price for Black citizens – if at all.

He hopped around the Midwest looking for a place to settle down. No matter where he went, he was waiting tables. Then he met a woman in Kansas City, Clementine Brown, who was also looking for something better.

Maybe they would find it in Minnesota.

They made their way north and tied the knot. In the boomtown of Duluth, Harry found work as a cook. But the Black community there was tiny, white people were hostile, and they had friends in Minneapolis. So Harry and Clementine settled down in the Twin Cities.

He found work in 1915 waiting on the city's powerful businessmen in the cafe of the Minneapolis Athletic Club, an impressive new building where ornate Native American motifs graced the dining room and palm trees lined an indoor swimming pool. The job paid $80 a month. Waiters "anxiously awaited" the opportunity to work there, according to the Twin City Star, a Black newspaper. The article noted that white people would occupy the head waiter and captain positions.

It wasn't a fair arrangement, but Harry gradually found his footing. He got work as a cook. Clementine got a good job at a local hospital. They bought a nice little house.

When his country went to war, Harry jumped at the chance to work in a factory making ammunition shells – a job that only opened to him because of a labor shortage. It was grueling toiling in the heat and grime of the plant, operating furnaces to apply a heat treatment to the metal. But at least it was a new opportunity.

Racial tensions boiled over after the war, and Harry had joined up in 1918 with the local NAACP chapter. He would need their help, because soon his neighborhood was in full revolt against Black residents. He and Clementine responded by staying put in the 1920s and making their home a social hub for the Black elite.

He seemed to have glimpses of optimism, even in the dark times. When the Little Dixie Sandwich Shop was barely hanging on during the Depression, Harry placed an ad in the Minneapolis Journal: "Prosperity and Happiness in 1931."

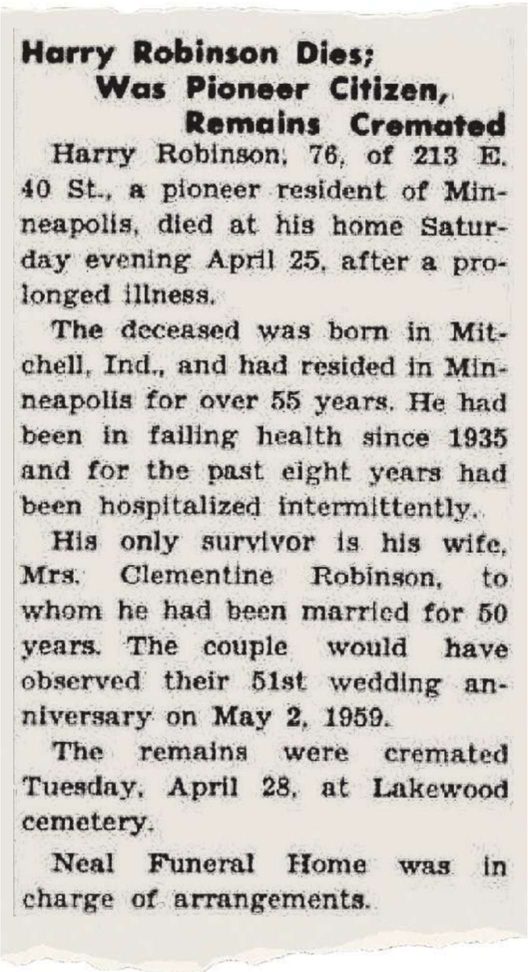
The business closed. They lost the house they had fought to keep. Then he contracted a long-term illness, and 54-year-old Harry started to slow down.

The city was changing. Its 4,000 Black residents – 1% of the population – were firmly hemmed in to increasingly segregated neighborhoods.

May 2 was his and Clementine's special day. Each year they celebrated their shared birthday as well as their wedding anniversary. Harry was in and out of the hospital as he and Clementine celebrated 50 years together in 1958. They had come a long way from the boardinghouse in Kansas City.

Harry died of rectal cancer just short of their 51st anniversary on April 25, 1959. He was heralded by the Black press as a "pioneer" citizen of Minneapolis.

His last wish was to have his ashes scattered over the Mississippi River. Clementine likely watched as the current carried his remains far away from Minnesota.



Harry Robinson Dies; Was Pioneer Citizen, Remains Cremated

Harry Robinson, 76, of 213 E. 40 St., a pioneer resident of Minneapolis, died at his home Saturday evening April 25, after a prolonged illness.

The deceased was born in Mitchell, Ind., and had resided in Minneapolis for over 55 years. He had been in failing health since 1935 and for the past eight years had been hospitalized intermittently.

His only survivor is his wife, Mrs. Clementine Robinson, to whom he had been married for 50 years. The couple would have observed their 51st wedding anniversary on May 2, 1959.

The remains were cremated Tuesday, April 28, at Lakewood cemetery.

Neal Funeral Home was in charge of arrangements.

INDIANA TO MINNESOTA
Harry Robinson died in 1959 at the age of 76. His obituary in the St. Paul Recorder dubbed him a "pioneer resident," which seems to have been a nod to his arrival in the city before many other Black migrants. His ashes were scattered over the Mississippi River.

A Missouri family strives for a future after slavery

Clementine Brown was born on May 2, 1881, in a small community just north of Kansas City, Mo., known as Shady Grove or Mecca. In the 1970s, the Army Corps of Engineers flooded the area to make Smithville Lake. All that's left of Mecca is the Black cemetery. Death certificates indicate that Clementine's parents are buried there, but there are no markers for them. By 1900, Clementine was living in Kansas City and working as a domestic servant. In 1907, she was living in a boardinghouse, where one of the other occupants was Harry Robinson.

LEARNING THE BEAUTY TRADE

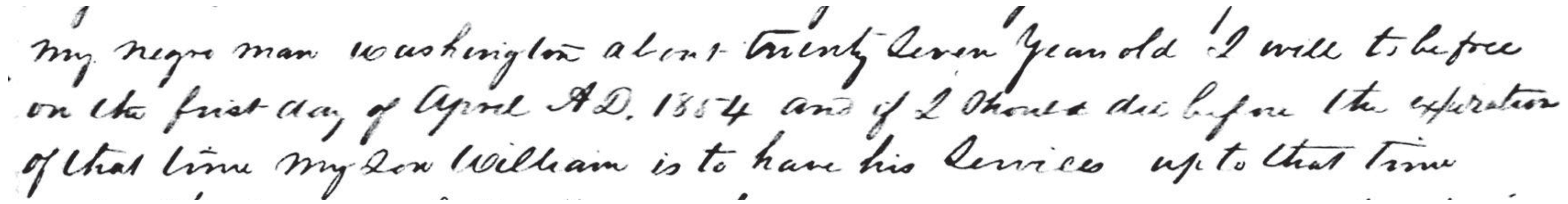
A news article in May 1908 announced that Clementine had graduated from the Moler School of Dermatology in Chicago, where she learned skills in hair care, facial massage and other beauty work. She was listed as living in St. Paul at that time. She and Harry married the following month. This 1905 textbook from the Moler School shows some of the techniques that Clementine would have learned there.

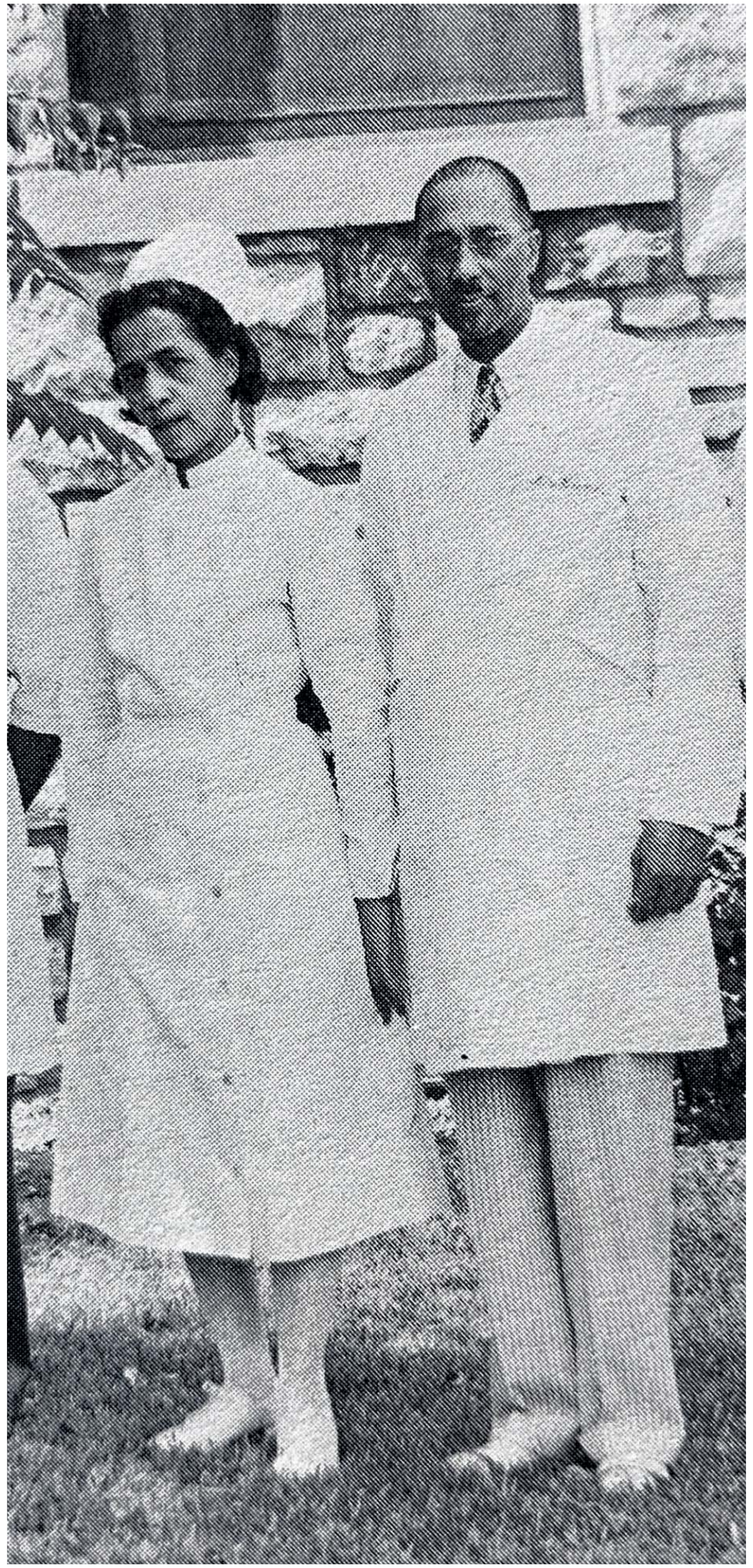

FIRST MOVEMENT.


HALF FIGURE EIGHT.

'I WILL TO BE FREE'

Clementine's father, a farmer and Baptist minister, was born in Kentucky and most likely enslaved there. By 1870, he was living in Mecca. Clementine's mother was probably born into slavery. But she soon became free because her father — Clementine's grandfather — was freed in 1854, before emancipation. Eric Roper found the will of slave owner Thomas Estes, freeing Washington Estes.


my negro man washington about twenty seven years old I will to be free
on the first day of April A.D. 1854 and if I should die before the expiration
of that time my son William is to have his services up to that time



SUCCESSFUL SIBLINGS

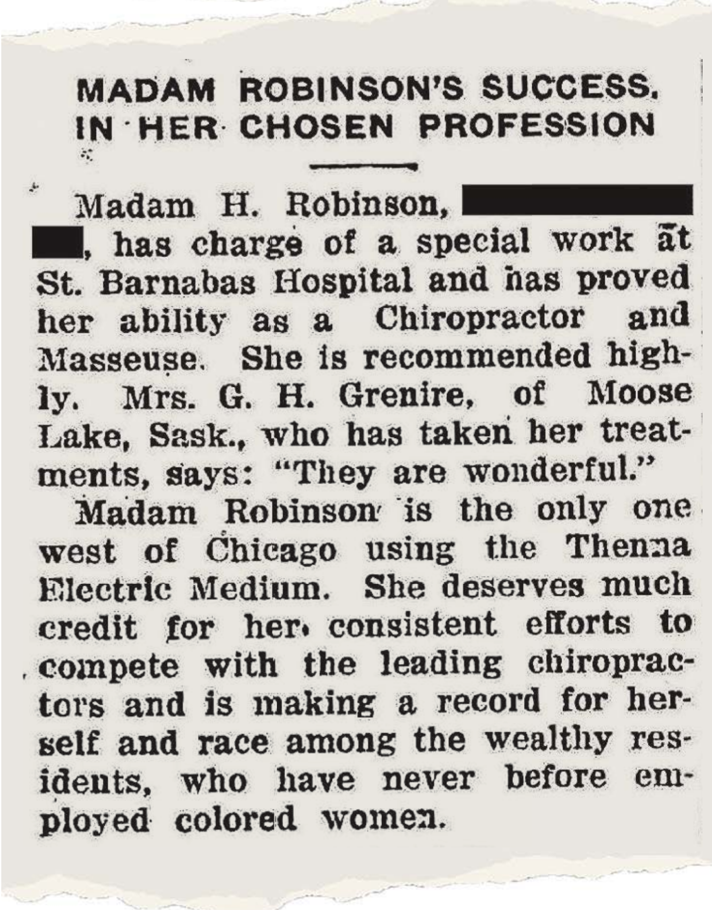
Clementine's brother Gideon Brown was a well-known physician in Kansas City, Mo., and a leader in the city's Black hospitals. Clementine's sister Laura Washington was a prominent nurse. This undated photo of Laura and Gideon, likely taken outside Wheatley-Provident Hospital, appeared in the book "Reaching for a Dream."

CLEMENTINE'S EMPLOYMENT

Clementine advertised her dermatology services in the Duluth Evening Herald in 1909. In 1916, an article announced Clementine had been appointed as "body masseur" at St. Barnabas Hospital in downtown Minneapolis. She worked for Dr. Robert Emmett Farr, a surgeon who was considered very innovative. Another article the following year in the Twin City Star applauded Clementine for "making a record for herself and race among the wealthy residents, who have never before employed colored women." The address has been redacted.


PERSONAL.

PERSONAL—CALL NEW PHONE 1381-K, Mrs. C. H. Robinson, graduate of dermatology, to do your hair dressing, manicuring, hand massage, facial massage, shampooing, singeing, dyeing, bleaching. Scalp treatment a specialty. Special attention to residence and hotel calls.


MADAM ROBINSON'S SUCCESS. IN HER CHOSEN PROFESSION

Madam H. Robinson, [redacted], has charge of a special work at St. Barnabas Hospital and has proved her ability as a Chiropractor and Masseuse. She is recommended highly. Mrs. G. H. Grenire, of Moose Lake, Sask., who has taken her treatments, says: "They are wonderful."

Madam Robinson is the only one west of Chicago using the Thenna Electric Medium. She deserves much credit for her consistent efforts to compete with the leading chiropractors and is making a record for herself and race among the wealthy residents, who have never before employed colored women.

Plenty of barriers for a student full of promise

Harry Robinson was born on May 2, 1881, and grew up in the small railroad town of Mitchell, Ind. Harry's parents were enslaved in Kentucky and moved to Indiana following the Civil War. Mitchell was the first place north of Louisville where a Black person could get off the train and feel welcome, according to Jeff Routh, who works at the Lawrence County Museum of History. Harry's father, Washington Robinson, was described in a newspaper article as "tall and well-built, a white-washer by trade, a Baptist by religion."

SUSAN ROBINSON

Harry's mother, Susan Robinson, was "a widely known church worker," according to her 1935 obituary in the Indianapolis Recorder. She was "one of [Bloomington, Indiana's] most highly respected citizens." This undated photograph of her appeared in the Indianapolis Recorder on the 10th anniversary of her death.

Indianapolis Recorder

HARRY ROBINSON,
The Mitchell colored boy who won the scholarship offered by the Nashville (Tenn.) Law School to the one taking the honors of our High School graduating class this year, and was turned down on account of his color.

SCHOLARSHIP REVOKED 'ON ACCOUNT OF HIS COLOR'

The Mitchell newspapers frequently mentioned Harry's achievements at the integrated Mitchell High School. He gave speeches on Otto Von Bismarck and "American Hero-worship." At one debate, he defended the argument that "Abraham Lincoln has done more for his country than George Washington." He ultimately took top honors in the class, which entitled him to a law school scholarship. The notice at left appeared atop the front page of the Mitchell Commercial after Harry graduated from high school in 1900. His scholarship to a Nashville law school had been revoked because he was Black. The short-lived law school was later exposed for swindling students.

L. Hendricks and a scholarship to the Nashville College Law School was given to Harry Robinson as the best scholar in the class.

After the presentation of the diplomas the members of the class were fairly deluged with flowers, expressive of the good will of friends. The audience was slow to leave a scene of so much life and interest and remained long to congratulate the class now covered with flowers of rare fragrance and beauty.

The members of the class is as follows:
Anna Grace Bass, Katherine Lee Bass,
Lourena Cosby Coleman, Frank Duncan
Earl Howard Deisher, Cora Gilbert,
Peryle Beatrice Jones, Harry Wood,
Verna White, Myra Lewis.
Harry Robinson.

A TRAGIC DEATH

Harry's father died in February 1890 from accidentally ingesting rat poison. The entire family was sickened after the poison sifted from a shelf onto their dinner. Harry was nearly 9 years old when this occurred. Poisonings like this were somewhat common during this era because rat poison was made from arsenic, which has no taste or odor.

Colored Minister Killed by It and Eight of His Family Affected.

Special to the Indianapolis Journal.

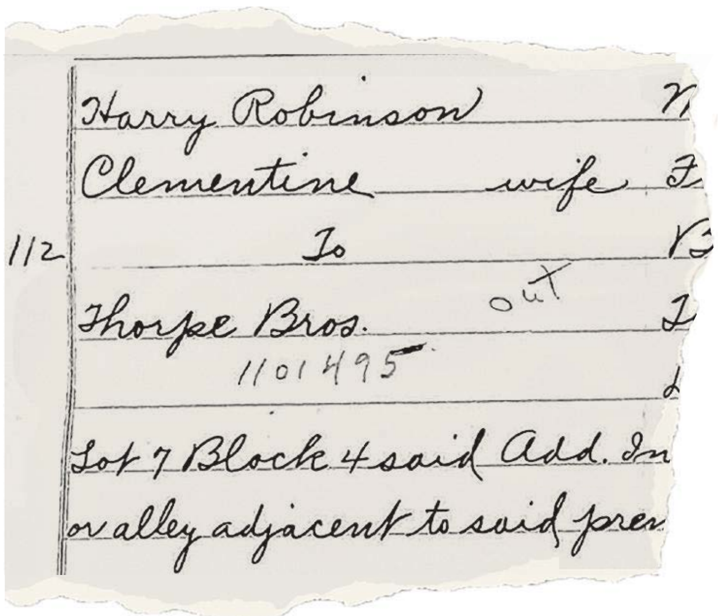
MITCHELL, Ind., Feb. 4.—Yesterday, after eating dinner, Washington Robinson, colored, a local preacher in the African Baptist Church, with his family, in all nine persons, were taken sick, but medical aid was not summoned until 8 o'clock in the evening. The physicans found it a case of poisoning, and rendered all the aid possible, but Mr. Robinson died to-day ...
... rest of the family ...

Concert at the A. M. E. church, Thursday night, Jan. 12th. The most important feature of the concert will be a discussion, "Resolved that Abraham Lincoln has done more for his country than George Washington," Affirmative, Harry Robinson, Charles Allen; Negative, B. V. Wilson, J. Nance, of Paoli. Admission 10 cents.

The following persons led the classes for the month of March: Seniors, Harry Robinson, Juniors, Ralph Crites, Sophomores, Harry Pope, Freshmen, Albert Pope and Don White,(tied.)

‘One of the most beautiful homes in Minneapolis’

After years of renting, Harry and Clementine bought their first house in 1917 in southwest Minneapolis. It was advertised as a “nice little six room house with three bedrooms near Nicollet and Second car lines.” At the time, they were one of about nine Black families who owned homes in that corner of the city. Several years later, a Black newspaper described it as “one of the most beautiful homes in Minneapolis.” More than a century later, Minnesota Star Tribune reporter Eric Roper bought the same house and learned about the Robinsons.



Harry Robinson
Clementine wife
To
1/2
Thorpe Bros. out
1101495
Lot 7 Block 4 said Add. In
or alley adjacent to said prem

ABSTRACT OF TITLE

Harry and Clementine Robinson are listed in an abstract of title that came with the house. The document shows financial transactions related to the house, including a number of loans that the Robinsons took out.

A HOUSE WITH HISTORY

The modest house features arched passageways and a stained-glass window on the main floor. Bay windows in the main bedroom offer a wide view of the street below. And many inhabitants have used the claw-foot tub in the upstairs bathroom. Eric Roper discovered a “bankruptcy sale” flyer beneath the porch from 1929, when the Robinsons lived in the house. It is now framed at the top of the stairs.

Photos by AYRTON BRECKENRIDGE • The Minnesota Star Tribune

The social media of the day for the Black community

The Robinsons almost immediately began hosting gatherings in their new home (address redacted here), which were documented in the pages of Black newspapers. The articles describe dinners, card games and club meetings – as well as table settings and decorations. Some of the gatherings were crowded affairs, featuring up to 20 guests. Clementine Robinson also attended many similar gatherings at other people's homes. In 1927, a Black newspaper in Kansas City described Clementine as "one of the leading society ladies of her city."

Mrs. Robinson, [redacted] was a charming hostess at cards to twenty ladies on Saturday. Mrs. L. R. Hill of St. Paul captured the first prize, Mrs. Robert Van Hook second, and the third went to Mrs. Pansy Chavis. The hostess served an elaborate luncheon.

NORTHWESTERN BULLETIN-APPEAL, 1925

Madame H. Robinson, [redacted] entertained at cards Wednesday, August 3rd, from two till five p. m., in honor of Mrs. Elah Brown of Chicago, and Mrs. Kelly H. Turner, 935 St. Anthony Ave., St. Paul, also entertained Mrs. Brown at cards Friday evening at Masonic Parlors. The guest of honor was highly entertained at both affairs.

MINNEAPOLIS MESSENGER, 1921

Mrs. Harry Robinson, [redacted] entertained twenty ladies at 500 Friday afternoon from 2 to 5. The out-of-town guests were Mrs. Nealy Collins of Kansas City, Kansas; Mesdames Washington and Wright of Indianapolis, Ind., and Miss McCracken and Mrs. Chavis.

NORTHWESTERN BULLETIN-APPEAL, 1925

DINNER SOCIAL AND CARD PARTY.

Madam H. Robinson, [redacted] gave a dinner in honor of Mrs. J. R. Kellar and Mrs. Smith Carney. Covers were laid for ten. The decorations were garden flowers. Card playing was the after dinner feature.

MINNESOTA MESSENGER, 1922

Madame Robinson, [redacted] entertained last Sunday at dinner in honor of Mrs. Ruth Dennis. The house was beautifully decorated. A three course dinner was served and the guests were very much pleased.

NATIONAL ADVOCATE, 1920

Madame Robinson, [redacted] entertained the 500 club last Wednesday.

NORTHWESTERN BULLETIN-APPEAL, 1924

Mme. Harry Robinson was hostess at luncheon Friday afternoon for Mrs. George De Vaughan and Mrs. L. R. Hill of St. Paul.

CHICAGO DEFENDER, 1925

Mrs. Legrinia Williams of Winnipeg is visiting Mrs. Ed. Hall of St. Paul. Mrs. Harry Robinson, [redacted] this city, entertained her last week. Covers were laid for ten.

TWIN CITY STAR, 1917

LIBERAL ART CLUB HOLD LUNCHEON IN MINNEAPOLIS

The club will begin its series of social hour parties in March, under the social hour director, Mrs. Lizzie Van Hook.

The next meeting will be with Mme. Clemitine Robinson, [redacted] February 27, at 12:45 P. M.

NORTHWESTERN BULLETIN-APPEAL, 1924

Mrs. C. H. Robinson, [redacted] entertained at dinner 16 guests on Christmas day.

TWIN CITY STAR, 1917

Harry's small business makes a splash on Lake

After years as a waiter, chef and caterer, Harry Robinson opened the Little Dixie Sandwich Shop in 1925. The restaurant was located in a building that no longer exists at 608 W. Lake St. – near Lyndale Avenue. He advertised its "Little Dixie Fried Chicken Sandwich" in an ad that ran in the Minneapolis Tribune, which also described the restaurant as being open from "dusk to dawn." Harry operated this business from 1925 until 1931.

Man Shot and Seriously Wounded in Restaurant— Negro Cook Under Arrest

HARRY ARRESTED

The Minneapolis Tribune and the Minneapolis Star (predecessors to the Minnesota Star Tribune) wrote very similar articles about a shooting at the Little Dixie Sandwich Shop. Eric Roper spent years researching this mysterious event. Listen to episodes 3 and 4 to hear what he found.

Mr. Harry Robinson of [redacted] has opened the Little Dixie Sandwich Shop at 608 West Lake. Mr. Robinson is a property owner of this city, and his wife, Madame Robinson, stands very high with the leading citizens in her profession. Mr. Robinson is a race man and has given freely of his work to the race.

A NEW BEGINNING

This announcement about Harry's new business appeared in May 1925 in the Northwestern Bulletin-Appeal. It noted that he is a "race man and has given freely of his work to the race."

Entertains At Luncheon At Sandwich Shop

Mr. J. R. Wilson entertained a group of sixteen Sunday evening at Little Dixie Sandwich Shop. The party met at the home of Madam Robinson, and from there went to the shop and had a delightful lunch. The dinner room was decorated with wonderful flowers. Those present were Mr. and Mrs. DeVaughn, Mr. and Mrs. Bryant, Mr. and Mrs. Van Hook, Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell, Mr. and Mrs. Hill, Mr. and Mrs. Gennetto, Mr. and Mrs. Robinson, Mr. and Mrs. Harris, Mrs. Dora Dean Johnson and Miss Gertrude Brown. After the lunch the party went for a long drive and returned to the home of Mr. Van Hook, where they were served with refreshments. The party dispersed giving great praise to the Little Dixie Sandwich Shop.

TALK OF THE TOWN

A prominent crowd gathered to celebrate Harry's new business in 1925, according to this article in the Northwestern Bulletin-Appeal. Guests included famous dancer Dora Dean Johnson, Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House leader W. Gertrude Brown, Minneapolis Urban League leader Abram Harris, and former NAACP chapter president George DeVaughn, among other luminaries in the city's Black community.

'The question may be asked, why hasn't the Negro accumulated more?

Has it ever occurred to you that he hasn't a ghost of a chance?

Have you ever stopped to think that every real money-making avenue is closed to him?'

The title of the podcast comes from this 1925 speech by W. Gertrude Brown, a prominent advocate for the Black community, head of the Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House and a friend of the Robinsons. Delivered to a social workers conference, the speech highlights the different ways that discrimination in Minneapolis was taking a toll on the city's Black community. Here are some excerpts:

...

"I wish it were possible for me to tell you the many disadvantages under which the Negro labors in an urban community. Since that is impossible I want to call your attention to a few of the most serious handicaps."

...

"In most communities gymnasium, swimming and camping facilities are denied our group. ... The Negro boy or girl is refused membership in the Y.M.C.A. and the Y.W.C.A. unless it is a branch. He is also refused membership in a Scout troop."

...

"Negro high school girls and boys are coming out each year with no opportunity to get employment other than domestic work. Because of this alarming situation they are becoming discouraged and it is very hard to induce them to continue, even through high school."

...

"It makes no difference how educated, honest and courteous your Negro bank messenger is, he is not in line for promotion. ... The Negro who washes the taxi cabs can drive them wherever the boss wishes, but cannot expect to become one of the drivers. Regardless of how learned and capable a Negro postal clerk may be, he can never hope to become a postmaster."

...

"I am confident that our good friends would save us this embarrassment if they only knew how it hurt. So often things are said and done of which we do not approve, but we hear, see, and say nothing. It isn't because we have not noticed or that we do not object, but our silence is only kept because we are hoping and praying that our good friends will catch the spirit and come to our rescue."

...

"I feel that all the problems in the Negro group in an urban community can be summed up in lack of opportunity to work and play. The Negro is not understood and few are willing to take a little time and learn about him."

Coming up: A bonus episode featuring the whole speech, voiced by local actor Regina Marie Williams, will be available Feb. 17.

Southwest Mpls. attempts to oust Black neighbors

Three years after the Robinsons moved into their house, a group of 200 white neighbors met five blocks away in 1920 to rid southwest Minneapolis of Black residents. The meeting was held at the club rooms of the South Central Community Club, an influential but short-lived neighborhood group. The protest spurred the formation of a committee to investigate the issue. The public meetings ultimately stopped, however, because "too much publicity was attracted to the district." Behind the scenes, the discussion continued through a series of letters.

A COMPLEX LEGACY

Pierce Atwater devoted much of his life to social work in Minnesota and elsewhere in the Midwest. His letter (facing page) illustrates how even supporters of civil rights were not necessarily champions of neighborhood integration. Years after his death, his name was among those read at a 1955 NAACP tribute to people who had "contributed to the advancement of the Negro and race relations in Minnesota," according to the St. Paul Recorder.

Minnesota Historical Society photo

'THE AIM IS TO PREVENT OTHERS FROM BUYING PROPERTY THERE'

Members of the protest group estimated that there were fewer than a dozen Black families living in Ward 13, which appears to refer only to families living west of Nicollet Avenue. The chair of the meeting, real estate agent James MacMullan, said the presence of Black residents was lowering property values. After calling off future meetings, the group forwarded their concerns to the Minneapolis Real Estate Board and the Minneapolis Civic & Commerce Association, which are now known as the Minneapolis Area Realtors and the Minneapolis Regional Chamber. The Civic & Commerce Association was described by a local civil rights leader several years later as "the strongest and most powerful organization in the entire city."

Negro Question Causes Protest

Residents of Thirteenth Ward Object to Members of Race as Neighbors.

Protesting against the presence of Negroes or persons of Negro blood, as residents in the Thirteenth ward, 200 men and women held a meeting at Forty-third street and Pillsbury avenue last night in the South Central community club rooms. The decision of the mass meeting was the appointment of a committee of 12 to investigate conditions, make a check on the number of residents with colored blood and ascertain who had sold the property to them. The committee will make its first re-

Committee Appointed to Count Negroes

Thirteenth Ward Property Owners Protest That Land Depreciated by Presence of Col-

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2025

My dear Mr. Atwater:

If these efforts are successful, it may lead to persecution of law abiding colored citizens who are now living in the Thirteenth Ward with the ultimate injection of racial antagonism which I am sure no good citizen of Minneapolis desires.

Very truly yours,

REQUEST TO THE NAACP

In December 1920, local NAACP leader Charles Sumner Smith requested that national NAACP Chair James Weldon Johnson write a letter to Pierce Atwater, a "friend at court" at the Civic & Commerce Association. Johnson wrote to Atwater at left "in reference to a reported attempt to enforce illegal segregation of colored people in Minneapolis."

It happens that the Thirteenth Ward is one of the outlying districts of the city, in which a good many moderately priced homes are being constructed by the younger people of the city, most of whom have small children and are putting their savings into a home in which they plan to live for a considerable number of years. There are but

be glad to let you know.

I think there is no question that sentiment of property holders throughout the Thirteenth Ward would be vigorously opposed to any influx of colored people in this district. I am sure, however, that any movement in this connection would be directed against the white people selling to colored people, rather than the other way around.

I doubt if this will clear up the situation to any great extent in your own mind, but those are the facts as nearly as I have been able to ascertain thus far.

Very truly yours.

Pierce Atwater

Assistant Secretary.

'VIGOROUSLY OPPOSED'

Atwater, a member of the NAACP working at the influential Minneapolis Civic & Commerce Association, wrote this response on Dec. 28, 1920, downplaying the controversy and justifying the actions of the protesters. "I think there is no question that sentiment of property holders throughout the Thirteenth Ward would be vigorously opposed to any influx of colored people in the district," he wrote. He added, however, that this would be a problem for the white people selling the homes — not the Black people.

I am glad that the situation regarding housing in the Thirteenth Ward in Minneapolis is not as serious as it first appeared. I can thoroughly appreciate the feeling of the home owners in the Thirteenth Ward, but at the same time, if colored citizens wish to purchase property in that Ward and are able to do so, it is the opinion of the Association that attempts to prevent such purchasing of property is not only illegal, but will lead to disturbances from which the city of Minneapolis has happily been free. I sincerely trust that there will be no further occurrences of the situation and I feel sure that you will do all within your power to prevent the aggravation and disturbing of race relations.

JOHNSON REMINDS ATWATER OF THE NAACP'S POSITION

In this letter from January 1921, Johnson carefully reminded Atwater what it means to be an ally of the organization. "It is the opinion of the Association that attempts to prevent such purchasing of property is not only illegal, but will lead to disturbances from which the city of Minneapolis has happily been free."

Library of Congress documents

Freeway takes a toll on the Old Southside

After losing their southwest Minneapolis home to foreclosure, Harry and Clementine Robinson moved east to an integrated neighborhood now referred to as the Old Southside. This area became home to an emerging Black middle class. The center of that neighborhood – at 38th Street and 4th Avenue – was often called "the corner" because of its thriving businesses. After renting in the area for a few years, the Robinsons bought a house there in 1952. From her front stoop, Clementine would have been able to watch the demolition that took place in the 1960s to build Interstate 35W. Despite claims by planners that they did not intend to harm neighborhoods, the interstate caused further segregation and lasting damage to the Old Southside.

A THRIVING DISTRICT

People who grew up in the Old Southside still have a deep connection and fond memories of the thriving Black community that was once there. Nelson Peery, who was a teenager there in the 1930s, wrote about the neighborhood in his book "Black Fire: The Making of an American Revolutionary." In the passage below, he talked about one of the most prominent members of the community, Anthony Brutus Cassius, pictured in the 1940s, and some of the other business owners at "the corner."

"The Dreamland Cafe, which sold 3.2 beer and served short order dinners, was owned by Anthony Brutus Cassius. Everyone liked this barrel-chested, pockmarked, light-brown-skinned bull of a man, cheerful and honest. He always conducted himself as if he were responsible to and for the people of our neighborhood. Sam Pantel owned the grocery. He overcharged everyone to make up for what he lost, giving credit to his destitute customers. Chris Christensen's shoe shop always hired a black kid as an apprentice shoemaker. Brownie, the brown skinned lady barber, sold policy slips and her shop was the gossip center of the community. She charged 25 cents for a haircut."

Photo: Hennepin County Library and the children of John Glanton

A BARRIER BETWEEN NEIGHBORHOODS

The composite image at right showing 1956 (top) and 1967 (bottom) aerials of the area around Clementine Robinson's home depicts how the freeway created a dividing line between the Old Southside and the southwest neighborhoods. Martin Luther King Jr. Park, then called Nicollet Field, is at left in both images. Before the freeway was built, this area was racially integrated and was an important connection point between southwest Minneapolis and the Old Southside. Planners chose this route for the freeway in part because property values there were lower — a sign that it was a border between neighborhoods. But this was due to decades of racist real estate practices that devalued homes near Black residents.

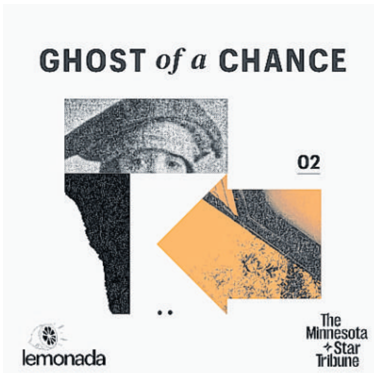
John R. Borchert Map Library at the University of Minnesota

Listen now to the 'Ghost of a Chance' limited series

Complete series available on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Amazon Music or wherever you get your podcasts. You can also use your phone to scan the QR code now to listen.

EP. 1: FALLING DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

Reporter Eric Roper moves into his 113-year-old house and finds an irresistible piece of history that sends him down a rabbit hole like no other.



EP. 2: NICE LITTLE HOUSE

Clippings from Black newspapers back in the 1910s help Eric piece together the lives of Harry and Clementine Robinson as they settle in a place as far north as they could get.

EP. 3: 'IT WAS UGLY'

It's one thing to become successful. It's another to hold onto it. Eric finds that in the 1920s, people were coming for the Robinsons and their Black neighbors.

EP. 4: WHY DID HE DO IT?

There is sometimes a steep price to pay for being bold. Eric investigates a mysterious shooting involving Harry, and an accusation that threatens his livelihood on the eve of a global catastrophe.

EP. 5: THE CORNER

Eric turns to the people who lived alongside Harry and Clementine Robinson to show him what it was like to start over in the new reality of the 1930s.

EP. 6: THE DIVIDING LINE

To find out what happened to the Robinsons in the 1960s, Eric doesn't need old records anymore. People alive today tell him the story of the moment when the jack hammers and bulldozers arrived.

Keep the conversation going with questions

The Minnesota Star Tribune partnered with Ebony Aya, recent Ph.D. graduate from the University of Minnesota's Curriculum and Instruction program and founder of Aya Collective Publishing, to develop a discussion guide that anyone can use to facilitate group conversations based on "Ghost of a Chance."

1. Harry endured traumatic childhood experiences that shaped his adult life. How does early childhood trauma influence people later in life? Have you observed this in your own experiences or those of others?

2. When nine Black families moved to southwest Minneapolis, their neighbors organized protests. An article from the time described Black families as "undesirable" neighbors. Why do you think this sentiment existed? Does it persist today?

3. Reflect on your own life – where do you see similarities or differences between your experiences and those of Harry and Clementine? What factors contribute to the differences?

Find the full discussion guide at startribune.com/ghostofachance

COMMUNITY EVENTS

The Minnesota Star Tribune will host events to continue a conversation about the historical context that helps us understand why Minnesota looks the way it does today.

Sign up for email alerts at startribune.com/ghostofachanceupdates

AND STILL MORE TO COME

The main narrative may be finished, but the story isn't done. Bonus episodes will be released starting Feb. 17.