

Dustin off the NEWS

By LUCIUS C. HARPER

FROM FRED DOUGLASS TO ROBESON, PEORIA HASN'T IMPROVED

"I AM going to Peoria with something like a real dread of the place. I expect to be compelled to walk the streets of that city all night to keep from freezing. The

last time I was there I could obtain no shelter at any hotel and I fear I shall meet similar exclusion tonight."

The man who spoke those words was walking with his friend, Samuel Brown, on a bleak, wintery night when prairie winds pierced him like needles in

the town of Elmwood, Ill., 20 miles from Peoria. The two were on the way to the railroad station. That was on a Saturday night in October 1882. The man, walking along with this dread in his mind, was the famous orator and abolitionist, Frederick Douglass. He was on a lecture tour, and had to get to Peoria to make

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necessary train connections. There was no Sunday train and he had to lay over in Peoria to make schedule Monday morning.

That was 65 years ago.

The suppression of Paul Robeson in April of 1947 by the mayor and chief-of-police of Peoria, just recently, leads us to believe that that little hayseed balliwick hasn't improved along racial lines since Frederick Douglass faced it with dread "way back yonder." If anything, it has "progressed" decidedly backward. Douglass was, however, able to get overnight accommodation in the best hotel in Peoria. Today a Negro would seek such accommodation in the best hotel there at his own peril. He just as well seek similar housing in Mississippi or Arkansas; Peoria now operates on the same fascist technique. It violates all the Civil Rights laws of Illinois, and is rather boastful about it.

IN THE case of both Douglass' and Robeson's visit to Peoria they had to rely on liberal citizens to rescue them from the viciousness of the city. Douglass found his in a white man, the famous orator, lawyer and agnostic, Robert G. Ingersoll, and Robeson's rescuer from the hick police force was a colored liberal, A. Jay Martin, CIO Farm Equipment Union organizer. Somehow, there are always such stalwart and liberal men found in the midst of fascist-soaked towns to redeem the city's name from un-American activities committed by crackpot politicians and poorly paid policemen, who for the most part have had only eighth grade schooling. Turning back the pages of history will refresh us somewhat on the Douglass-Peoria incident of 65 years ago . . . before the coming of Paul Robeson in 1947. Mr. Douglass wrote of it as follows:

"After I had told Mr. Brown of my last experience in Peoria, he was visibly affected and for some time was silent. At last, as if suddenly discovering a way out of a painful situation, he said: 'I know a man in Peoria, should the hotels be closed against you there, who would gladly open his doors to you—a man who will receive you at any hour of the night, and in any weather, and that man is Robert G. Ingersoll.' Why, said I, it would not do to disturb a family at such a time as I shall arrive there, on a night so cold as this. 'No matter about the hour,' he said, 'neither he nor his family would be happy if they thought you were shelterless on such a night. I know Mr. Ingersoll, and that he will be glad to welcome you at midnight or at cock-crow.'

"I BECAME much interested by this description of Mr. Ingersoll. Fortunately I had no occasion for disturbing him. I found quarters for the night at the best hotel in the city. In the morning I resolved to know more of this now famous and noted 'infidel.' I gave him an early call, for I was not so abundant in cash as to refuse hospitality in a strange city when on a mission of goodwill to men. The experience worked admirably. Mr. Ingersoll was at home, and if I have

ever met a man with real living human sunshine in his face, and honest, manly kindness in his voice, I met one who possessed these qualities that morning. I received a welcome from Mr. Ingersoll and his family which would have been a cordial to the bruised heart of any proscribed and storm-beaten stranger, and one which I can never forget or fail to appreciate.

"Perhaps there were many Christian ministers and Christian families in Peoria at that time by whom I might have been received in the same gracious manner. In charity I am bound to say there probably were such ministers and such families, but I am equally bound to say that in my former visits to this place I had failed to find them. Incidents of this character have greatly tended to liberalize my views as to the value of creeds in estimating the character of men. They have brought me to the conclusion that genuine goodness is the same, whether found inside or outside the church, and that to be an 'infidel' no more proves a man to be selfish, mean, and wicked, than to be evangelical proves him to be honest, just, and humane."

SO FAR there is nothing on record to prove that the "Christian ministers and Christian families" in Peoria are any different from the time span between Frederick Douglass and Paul Robeson. They certainly haven't utilized their pulpits to improve racial conditions in Peoria. What have they said on the Robeson ouster in their segregated cathedrals? Robeson is a Christian and a gentleman, working in the interest of mankind. Is he not good theme for a Sunday sermon? The Bible is full of parables about Christians being "rejected by the common herd." Would not Mayor Triebel of Peoria and his 14 eighth grade cops come under the latter classification? Studying Peoria from an historical viewpoint, it seems to have been more liberalized under "infidels" than it is today under so-called "Christians."