

# Harper Known Nationally For His Work

Is there one outstanding Negro in Peoria? There is! This is the story of Henry Harper, last in a series of eight articles on "The Negro in Peoria."

By BILE CONVER

A gentle man, but one with bulldog tenacity imbued with a steady-burning strength and mantled with patience and faith.

This would perhaps be a capsule description of Henry E. Harper, executive director of the George Washington Carver Community Center at 219 N. Sheridan Rd. He has brought Peoria a reflection of his recognition nationally as a leader in his field of recreation, community and human relations, religious endeavor and welfare work.

**HARPER TOOK CARVER** Center in its infancy back in 1944 and brought it to the point where 336 different families are represented in its enrollment. There are 31 different clubs, classes and organizations operating at the center and it offers many services where its facilities are made available for community events and activities.

In 1944 there were only about 300 registrants for the center's activities. Now there are over 1,300.

**HARPER PAYS PARTICULAR** attention to teen-age activities and is proud of the fact that there are 522 youths under 18 years enrolled in the various clubs and activities, including 279 boys and 243 girls.

Harper should be particularly interested in that phase of the center's work for he and his wife, Letha Mae, are the parents of eight children, Frank, 24; Robert, 23; Wayne, 21; Joseph, 19; Patricia Mae, 17; William, 15; Mary, 12, and Charles 6.

**HARPER'S EARLY** story reads like those of many Negro youngsters. He was the son of share-cropping parents near Pulaski, Tenn. Born June 1, 1908, he lost his father in 1917, and in 1919 was sent to his sister, Mrs. Willie Mae Gant in Columbia.

Mrs. Gant and her husband moved to Pontiac, Mich., in 1920 and Harper went along to become a varsity football, basketball and track star at Pontiac Central High School besides engaging in student organizational activities and clubs. He made the all-state football team in 1927 and won the interscholastic shotput and discus titles at the state meet at Michigan State College.

Harper was graduated by Western Michigan College in 1932 with a degree in social science and health education after being married the previous year. He was also active in student affairs and

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varsity sports. Letha also attended Western Michigan.

**HIS FIRST JOB** was at Topeka, Kan., where he taught school in the elementary grades and was director of summer playground work. He also coached and played football with the Santa Fe Railroad team for three seasons. During his stay there he was appointed county director of Negro adult education and recreational projects and served as state editor of the Negro division of the Federal Writers Projects under the W.P.A. program.

Back to Pontiac went the Harpers in 1937 and he became executive director of the Southwest Community Center. He also served in various capacities for the swiftly growing General Motors industry and federal projects. In 1942 he worked with the state N.Y.A. program as area director of Negro affairs. In 1944 he selected the Peoria job from among four opportunities. The others were at Dayton, Lima and Hamilton in Ohio.

"I selected the local appointment because of the challenge it offered," he said. "It was in an area similar to the Michigan area and it afforded an opportunity to assist in developing the area of individual and group leadership into the field of civic, cultural, recreational and social and economic interpretation through programming and cooperation with other existing agencies and community services."

**IT IS APPARENT** from his record that Harper has more than succeeded in meeting the challenge of which he speaks.

To be real brief, he had charge of directing the \$17,000 remodeling of the old Bell Telephone Co. garage which is the present center.

He also succeeded in setting up standards for the center's personnel. Qualifications of the personnel now employed meet national standards. Public relations

of the center are vastly improved and Harper particularly likes the way the users of the center and the public in general have taken to his institution of a department of drama and fine arts there under the able tutelage and direction of Miss Juliette Whittaker. Other full time staff members are Frank Campbell, Kathryn Williams and Mary Carrol.

People whose lives Harper touches do not forget him. In 1955 he was given a dinner and a gift in Pontiac by the basketball players he had coached and those with whom he had played.

**PEORIA AND THE NATION** are quick to take advantage of his talent, energy and integrity. In 1947 he was sent to Fisk University in Nashville, Tenn., as a representative of the Peoria Council of Churches at the workshop on human and race relations. He has served on the Council of Churches for 10 years here.

Mayor Robert Morgan's Council of Human Relations also granted him a scholarship to Bradley summer graduate school for advanced study in human and race relations.

Beginning in 1954 for two years he was chairman of the national committee administering the E.T. Atwell Memorial Scholarship Fund to provide schooling for recreation, welfare and community workers.

Atwell was the field worker for the National Recreation Assn., who first recommended Harper to Peoria leaders when they contemplated opening Carver Center in 1943. He is credited with helping to establish 273 community centers like Carver over the country.

**"THE ULTIMATE** aims, of course, are to enlarge the facilities here," said Harper. "We could then broaden the program with a large game room, a gymnasium, more club room and workshop space and remodeling of the present game room to accommodate adult citizens.

"There is definite need for a day nursery and a community health center," he continued, noting that there are more working mothers now than ever before.

Harper's vision extends beyond the center, however.

"All these things we want to do are aimed at improving the lot of this minority group," he states firmly. "Things accomplished here at the center are aimed partly at gaining better public acceptance and consideration for the employment of Negroes, especially high school and college graduates.

**"ANY IMPROVEMENT** in this way would help immeasurably in raising the morale of the youngsters and give them incentive for continuing efforts at gaining more and more education."

He remembers well the incident which may have shaped his entire life.

"I was in school," he recalls, "and decided to seek summer employment on the playground at Pontiac. On my interview, the director pointed out to me the problems that I might face since he had all white leaders. However, he agreed to let me try as a volunteer worker."

His work was so impressive that the next summer he went on the payroll and stayed for several summers afterward. Thus began a fine career forged in adversity and muscled with practice at overcoming obstacles.

Out of his years of work for his people and his community has come a tremendous store of tolerance and understanding. Peorians are lucky indeed to have a man of his stature in their midst.





**DISCUSSING PLANS FOR FUTURE** programs at Carver Community Center are these teen-agers and member of the Youth Council, who represent all high and junior high schools in the city. Chairman of the meet is Nellie Brown, standing, facing toward camera, president. Frank Campbell and Mrs. Katherine Timmes, rear with book, staff supervisors, are councilors of the group. The Youth Council established all rules of conduct at the Center, a Red Feather agency.



**CREDITED WITH BUILDING CARVER CENTER** into its present prominence as a recreation headquarters for children and adolescents is Henry M. Harper, seated, executive director, shown with his wife, Letha, and five of their eight children. Youngest member of the family is Charles, 6, foreground, and standing are, left to right, Mary E., 12, Patricia, 17, William, 15, and Robert, 23. Not shown are Frank Henry, 24, who will be graduated by Western Michigan University in June; Wayne Dean, 22, serving with the Air Force in France, and Joseph, 20, who works at St. Francis hospital.