THE NEGRO IN PEORIA

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 BILL 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 B. Harper, executive director of the George Washington Carver Community Center at 1909 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 endeavors and welfare work.

HARPER TOOK CARVER Center in its infancy back in 1944 and brought it to the point where 325 different families are represented in its enrollment. There are 35 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 1,000.

HARPER PAYS PARTICULAR attention to teen-age activities and is proud of the fact that there are 322 youths under 18 years enrolled in the various clubs and activities, including 278 boys and 44 girls.

Harper should be particularly interested in the phase of the center's work for he and his wife, Letha Mae, are the parents of eight children: Erna 21; Robert A., 19; Joseph, 19; Patrick, 17; William, 15; Charles 14; Mary 12; and Charles 6.

HARPER'S EARLY story is like those of many Negro youngsters. He was the son of share-cropping parents near Pulaski, Peoria. Born June 1, 1908, he joined the army 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 1926 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 shutout and discus titles at the state meet at Michigan State College.

Harper was graduated by Western Michigan College in 1933 with a degree in social science and physical education after being married the previous year. He was also active in student affairs and

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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 scholarships 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 adults 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 I 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 Wellie Brown, standing facing toward camera, president. Frank Campbell and Mrs. Katherine Timmes, rear with book, staff supervisors, are counselors 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, 29, who works at St. Francis Hospital.