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ABSTRACT

This is a report prepared by the Illinois Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights. It deals with how local, state and federal officials, as well as private individuals and groups, have dealt with Cairo, Illinois' racial and economic problems. The areas addressed are employment, housing, health, and law enforcement. It has been found that the impact of civil rights legislation has still not reached Cairo after nearly a decade. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has not yet processed its discrimination charges. The State Fair Employment Practices Commission admits it has done "nothing" to end discrimination in Cairo because it does not have the money or legislative authority to take effective action. The City Council lets its attitude towards Blacks stand in the way of selling vacant property to a corporation willing and able to build desperately needed low-income housing for the city's poor. A segregated all-white school continues to operate with the support of federally sponsored tax exempt status while the public school system nears financial ruin. In spite of these failures, Blacks have accomplished a great deal during the past decade. For instance, the biracial board of directors and black administrative staff of a housing corporation have successfully overcome the roadblocks of the City Council and have provided low-income housing for poor whites and blacks.
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A DECADE OF WAITING IN CAIRO

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the Commission. This report will be
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June 1975

A DECADE OF WAITING IN CAIRO

--A report prepared by the Illinois
Advisory Committee to the United
States Commission on Civil Rights.

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The findings contained in this report are those of the Illinois Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights and, as such, are not attributable to the Commission.

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Sirs and Madam:

The Illinois Advisory Committee submits this report of its followup study of Cairo, Ill. as part of its responsibility to advise the Commission about civil rights problems within this State.

The basic issue which this report addresses is the responsiveness of local, State, and Federal agencies as well as private individuals and groups to the findings and recommendations made by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights following its 3-day hearing in Cairo during March 1972.

The Advisory Committee has been involved in Cairo since 1966 when it held 2 days of open meetings in that city regarding employment, housing, welfare, education, and health. During the past 9 years both the Commission and the Illinois Advisory Committee have continued to monitor the racial and economic strife of Cairo. During 1974 the Advisory Committee held two informal hearings where Federal and State officials testified concerning their actions in Cairo. Staff members made onsite visits to the city to interview local officials and residents.

The specific issues examined in this report include employment, education, housing, health, and law enforcement. The purpose of the report is to give the Commission and the public an up-to-date analysis of the present situation in Cairo and to document the responsiveness of local, State, and Federal agencies to the needs of the city. This review is also intended to assist other local communities that find themselves in situations similar to Cairo. The Advisory Committee believes that both the positive and negative responses to the racial and economic dilemma of Cairo can be a learning tool for others.

Respectfully,

/s/

RUBEN I. CRUZ
Chairperson

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A DECADE OF WAITING IN CAIRO was written by Duane Lindstrom and was the principal staff assignment of Valeska Hinton. Assistance in the research and preparation of the report was provided by Margaret Johnson, Delores Miller, and Sharon Rivers. The report was prepared under the supervision of Clark G. Roberts, Regional Director, Midwestern Office, U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

Final edit and review was conducted in the Commission's Office of Field Operations, Washington, D.C., by editor Bonnie Mathews, assisted by Mary Frances Newman. Preparation of all State Advisory Committee reports is supervised by Isaiah T. Creswell, Jr., Assistant Staff Director for Field Operations.

THE UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON CIVIL RIGHTS

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INTRODUCTION

Cairo, Illinois, is a microcosm of the urban and rural woes which plague America. If Cairo's problems are not manageable, there is little reason to believe that the same problems can be solved on a larger scale in other cities or locations.

This is a report of how local, State, and Federal officials, as well as private individuals and groups, have attempted to deal with Cairo's racial and economic dilemma since the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights first became involved in this southern Illinois community nearly a decade ago.

Few people paid much attention to this once booming Mississippi River town prior to 1966, the year the Illinois Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights first came to Cairo. Few, if any, State or Federal agencies were aware of the destructive elements which had been at work in the city for years.

Sitting at the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, Cairo had once been a bustling city of 18,000 people, supporting riverboat commerce, a lumbering industry, cotton, rail traffic, and grain farming. The fertile land surrounding the rivers was called "Little Egypt" because of its similarity to the Nile River Valley, and Cairo, "the queen of Little Egypt," was the center of activity.

The mechanization and technological advances of the early 1900s left Cairo behind, however. Steel-hulled barges made Cairo's wood barge shipbuilding and servicing

facilities obsolete. Diesel-powered locomotives put the city's steam locomotive roundhouse out of business. Unsophisticated planning allowed the lumbering industry to completely wipe out the area's supply of saleable lumber, and the mechanical cotton picker was found to be too large for use in the relatively small plots of cotton in the Cairo area.¹

Unemployment, poverty, and blighted housing followed in the wake of Cairo's declining economy. By 1970 the population had dwindled to 6,000. Competition for the few remaining jobs increased and evidence of a class system and pecking order placing whites ahead of blacks clearly emerged.

Blacks had historically comprised a large segment of the population. Geographically located farther south than Richmond, Va., Cairo had served as an important link in the underground railway for escaped slaves in pre-Civil War days. Although in a free State, the city maintained much of the climate and character of the South, and many blacks chose to remain rather than travel farther North into unfamiliar surroundings.

In his 1910 "History of Cairo," John M. Lansdon described Cairo as "a southern city, not only geographically but racially. In the latter respect it is no more likely to change than in the former." The racial atmosphere was later described by a special house committee of the Illinois General Assembly which found that the city's whites "generally manifest a southern paternalistic attitude towards blacks." The committee cited a history of "paternalistic racial attitudes" and "unequal opportunity" for blacks in Cairo.²

Blacks did not settle for being second class citizens, however, and insisted upon being treated equally. In the 1940s, for example, the Cairo educational system paid its black teachers on a lower pay scale than its white teachers.

1. Warren Logelin, "The Loneliest Exchange,"
Illinois Bell Magazine, November 1973, pp. 2, 5.

2. State of Illinois, Special House Committee on Cairo.
Preliminary Report of the Special House Committee to
Investigate the Allegations Concerning the County of
Alexander and the City of Cairo Appointed Pursuant to
House Resolution No. 118, 76th General Assembly, (May 1969),
© p. 5 (hereafter cited as Preliminary Report).

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People took legal action and won equal pay for blacks.

In the 1950s blacks attempted to get the city to desegregate its public schools and movie theaters. These attempts were met, however, with bombings and threats of violence to black leaders.

In 1964 the city opened a swimming pool on an integrated basis due to efforts of the black community. Within 2 weeks pressure was brought by white citizens and the pool was closed. It remains closed to this day.³

During 2 days of hearings in 1966, the Illinois Advisory Committee heard further reports of the economic and racial problems of Cairo. Witnesses testified that the Cairo Police Department discriminated against blacks and had on one occasion physically beaten a black deputy sheriff who had earlier arrested a white man. Others testified that public housing in Cairo was operated on a completely segregated basis, that the city and surrounding Alexander County refused to hire blacks, except for menial and janitorial positions, and that schools were completely segregated, one with all white students and faculty and one with all black students and faculty.

At the completion of the hearing, the Advisory Committee warned that there was evidence indicating local, State, and Federal agencies had joined a vicious circle of racial discrimination and economic depression and that various agencies were deeply involved in violating the civil rights of individual black residents of Cairo. Worse, the Advisory Committee concluded, government programs set up to end discrimination, "have failed in the past, are failing at present, and most important, are threatening to fail in the future."⁴

3. "Cairo, Illinois: Law With Justice?" (Chicago: Alliance to End Repression, undated), p. 4.

4. U.S., Commission on Civil Rights, Illinois Advisory Committee, A Report on Federal Civil Rights Programs in Southern Illinois (January 1967), p. 2.

The following year, 1967, Cairo erupted into a racial war which, during the next 5 years, was to make the city the subject of national attention. Blacks and whites fired rounds of ammunition at each other in nightly shootouts in the streets prompting a New York Times reporter to speculate that Cairo might be a nightmare vision of the future of America.⁵ One network newscaster commented, "Guns and firebombs are the only bargaining [agents] in evidence. And you simply cannot find a note of optimism anywhere in this town."⁶

As the street battles raged, local, State, and Federal agencies fashioned remedies for what had become the unlikely but deserving national symbol of racial polarity.

The mayor of Cairo described his remedy during a 1970 network newscast, "If we have to kill them [blacks] we'll have to kill them. It seems to me that this is the only way that we are going to solve our problems."⁷

The Governor of Illinois responded to Cairo's problems by sending State troopers into the city to restore law and order. Instead, the State police arrested blacks for participating in peaceful protests and conducted sweeping raids into the homes of blacks in search of weapons. Both activities were later ruled by the courts to be unconstitutional abuse of the rights of blacks.⁸

The Federal Government responded to the Cairo situation with the formation of a "task force" made up of regional agency heads with jurisdiction, authority, or programs applicable to Cairo. Within 2 years the task force recommended that it "be relieved of its responsibilities" to Cairo "since it had met with frustration...and was unable to get the kind of positive response that it felt was necessary...."⁹

5. Logelin, "Loneliest," p. 5.

6. ABC, "ABC Evening News," Nov. 14, 1970.

7. Ibid.

8. William R. Brinton, "The Story of Confrontation," FOCUS/Midwest, vol. 8, no. 54 (1972), p. 13.

9. Harvey Lorberbaum, chairperson, Cairo Task Force, memorandum to William B. Lewis, June 17, 1971, Commission files.

Local blacks responded by uniting in an economic boycott of white merchants doing business in the city. "As we look at it we have never been part of the economy of Cairo," said Preston Ewing, president of the Cairo chapter of the NAACP and a boycott organizer. "We don't hold jobs there, we just spend money there. We have decided not to spend our money there. We have found no law that requires black people to buy downtown."¹⁰

The boycott, organized by the United Front of Cairo, began in April 1969 and soon took its toll on Cairo's white businesses. Total receipts of local business establishments fell off by more than 12 percent during the first year of the boycott as compared to the previous year. During the same time period, business receipts for the State of Illinois were increasing by 4.5 percent. In addition, the number of local establishments doing business in Cairo dropped by more than 27 percent while, by comparison, the number dropped only 16 percent for the State as a whole. The economic boycott was continued through 1973.¹¹

Local white residents responded by forming the Committee of Ten Million, which soon became known as the "white hats" because of the white construction helmets and other para-military trappings worn by its members. Nearly every able-bodied white male adult in Cairo became a member of the organization which the Special House Committee of the Illinois Legislature said "appears to be a vigilante group."¹² The organization's leaders claimed that through a telephone chain it could have 320 armed white men in the streets of Cairo within 75 minutes.¹³

10. "On the Battlefield: Cairo, Illinois," (Bloomington: The Concerned Community Coalition of Bloomington-Normal and Community for Social Action, undated), p. 5 (hereafter cited as Battlefield).

11. Glevin Stevenson, "The Economic Basis of the Cairo Conflict," FOCUS/Midwest, vol. 8, no. 54 (1971), p. 20.

12. Preliminary Report, p. 9.

13. Everett J. Santos, Office of General Counsel, U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, memorandum to Illinois Advisory Committee, June 17, 1969.

The local State's attorney, chief of police, and sheriff participated in the group's activities and announced publicly that all 600 white hats could be deputized in an emergency situation. Such actions were declared "illegal and intolerable" by the Special House Committee and under threat of an injunction by the attorney general of Illinois, the group was disbanded. Shortly thereafter, however, the group was superseded by the formation of the United Citizens for Community Action, which claimed no authority to be deputized as law enforcement officials but continued the organizational efforts of "States rights and racial integrity."¹⁴

In the spring of 1972, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights held a 3-day hearing in Cairo "after the outward manifestations of racial hostility had abated" in order to look at the underlying causes of racial strife, to determine how to prevent the recurrence of violence which had filled the past 5 years, and to measure the effectiveness of those individuals and agencies attempting to deal with the issues.

After its hearing the Commission issued a report entitled "Cairo, Illinois: A Symbol of Racial Polarization" which listed 19 specific recommendations to local, State, and Federal officials to eliminate the racial discrimination and economic depression which the Commission found.¹⁵

In 1974 the Illinois Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights sent staff members to Cairo to again measure the racial and economic conditions of the city as a followup to the Commission's recommendations. The Advisory Committee also held 2 days of informal hearings to document the actions taken by those local, State, and Federal agencies to whom the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights had made special recommendations.

¹⁴. U.S., Commission on Civil Rights, Cairo, Illinois: Racism at Floodtide (October 1973), pp. 16-17 (hereafter cited as Floodtide).

¹⁵. U.S., Commission on Civil Rights, Cairo, Illinois: A Symbol of Racial Polarization (February 1973), pp. 3, 12-28 (hereafter cited as Symbol).

The Advisory Committee's findings are summarized in the following five chapters: employment, housing, education, health care, and law enforcement.

EMPLOYMENT

The governments of Cairo and Alexander County have not taken appropriate steps, as recommended by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, to provide equal employment opportunity in public employment in order to undo the effects of past discrimination.

The Alexander County Board of Commissioners and the mayor of Cairo have continued to overlook blacks for appointments to the various governing boards and commissions of the city and county. In 1972 the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights was told by John Bleveans, chief counsel for the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, that less than 5 percent (5 out of 126) of the appointed positions on active boards or commissions were filled with blacks. Yet, blacks comprised more than 28 percent of the Alexander County population and more than 37 percent of the Cairo population.¹⁶

This situation has not been appreciably changed in the city of Cairo according to Mayor James Walder. No steps have been taken to alter the racial composition of any boards or commissions since the 1972 findings.¹⁷

16. John Bleveans, Public Boards and Commissions: City of Cairo and Alexander County, Illinois (Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, Mar. 24, 1972). Exhibit presented during testimony before the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

17. James Walder, Mayor of Cairo, interview in Cairo, Oct. 9, 1974. (Hereafter cited as Walder interview).

The Alexander County Board of Commissioners has relented, however, to demands of some Cairo residents that blacks be made a part of the Alexander County Housing Board which governs the operations of public housing in Cairo. As a result of a law suit brought by the residents and later joined by the U.S. Department of Justice, the county board has agreed to comply with a court decree entered October, 1974, guaranteeing that at least two of the five members of the Housing Board would be black.¹⁸ The decree is presently in effect and two blacks now sit on the board.¹⁹

The county board and the city of Cairo have also failed to adequately recruit and hire blacks in numbers representative of their proportion of the population. The city's payroll includes 13 firepersons according to Mayor Walder. None are black. The police department has 17 employees; 2 are black.²⁰

A private research group from Southern Illinois University reported in 1973 that only 12 of the 130 city employees were black and that 10 of the 12 were street or garbage workers. Another study of city expenditures, reported in the St. Louis Monitor, found that 96 percent of the city's payroll and annual expenses went to whites and only 4 percent went to blacks.²¹

In 1973 the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunities Commission conducted a special investigation of Cairo employment in response to a recommendation of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. As a result, charges of

18. *U.S. v. Alexander County Housing Authority*, Civ. No. CV73-76D (E.D. Illinois, Oct. 17, 1974).

19. *Michael P. Seng*, attorney for residents and chief counsel, Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation, letter to Commission staff, Feb. 27, 1975 (hereafter cited as Seng letter).

20. *Walder interview*.

21. *Floodtide*, p. 88.

employment discrimination have been filed by EEOC against the city of Cairo, the Cairo Police Department, the Cairo Fire Department, the Alexander County Board of Commissioners, and the Alexander County Housing Authority.

The EEOC charges have had little impact, however, because the agency has failed to process the charges in a timely manner. According to Elmer McLain, Region V Director of EEOC, all of the charges had been filed before July 1, 1973, and administrative processing was to be completed "this fiscal year which will end on June 30, 1974, or certainly...well before the end of the calendar year." (Feb. 1974, p. 12)²²

As of February 1975, however, the administrative process had not been completed and, in fact, was still in its initial phases. According to EEOC regional investigator Ruby Smith, the charges had been assigned to an investigator. However, onsite visits had not been arranged and a definite time schedule for the administrative process had not been completed.²³

The Illinois Fair Employment Practices Commission has also confirmed that "there is definitely employment discrimination because of race in Cairo and Alexander County." The FEPC has been ineffective in combating the discriminatory practices, however, and the Illinois Legislature has failed to follow the recommendation of the U.S. Commission on Civil

22. Date and page number in parentheses cited here and hereafter in the text refer to statements in transcripts of the Commission's 1972 hearing and the Illinois Advisory Committee's informal hearings of June 1966, February 1974, and December 1974. Transcripts on file with U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Washington, D.C. and with the Commission's Midwest Regional Office, Chicago, Ill. References indicating "special p." or "following p." are used for the February 1974 transcript to note material not in the correct numerical sequence.

23. Ruby Smith, staff investigator, Region V, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, telephone interview, Feb. 26, 1975.

Rights that FEPC be empowered to initiate investigations on its own and issue orders aimed at patterns or practices of discrimination. Currently, the FEPC is restricted to responding to specific complaints.

FEPC Director Melvin Jordan told the Illinois Advisory Committee that his agency had accomplished "nothing" to improve minority employment in the Cairo area. "I think that's a direct reflection on the level of staffing, the level of funding, and the structure of the statute itself, which was never designed to work," Jordan concluded. "We hope that with the changing complexion in the General Assembly this time around we might get it [initiatory powers]. The agency has sought these changes in the statute but it has never been accommodated." (Dec. 1974, pp. 177, 178)

Not only have city and county officials been charged with discriminatory employment practices but the Federal Government as well has been cited for discrimination in construction projects which it funds.

During its 1966 informal hearing the Illinois Advisory Committee received evidence of discrimination in federally funded highway projects. A spokesperson for the Federal Highway Administration (then known as the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads) told the Advisory Committee that although racial discrimination had taken place in the past, in the future "no person...shall be...subjected to discrimination under any highway programs receiving Federal financial assistance..." (1966, p. 317)

During the 1972 hearing, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights received evidence that highway administration projects continued to discriminate against blacks. (1972, pp. 531-533) A compliance review conducted shortly after the hearing by the highway administration found that 12 out of 13 construction projects had minority employment "significantly below that which should normally be expected." Five of the 13 projects were found to be in absolute non-compliance with affirmative action plans.²⁴

24. A. L. Frank, Deputy Regional Administrator, U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, letter to Governor Norman A. Erbe, Nov. 10, 1972.

In testimony during the 1974 informal hearing of the Illinois Advisory Committee, Ted Sennett, Region V civil rights officer for the Federal Highway Administration, promised that appropriate action to quell discrimination was being insisted upon by the Administration but that blacks would have to wait for non-discrimination to become a reality because "changes in traditional practices are slow." (Feb. 1974, p. 6 following p. 115)

In 1966 and in 1972 evidence indicated that blacks were much harder hit by unemployment in Cairo and Alexander County than were whites. The trend has not only continued but has become more acute.

In 1972 the Commission found that the overall unemployment rate for Alexander County was 9 percent; whites were unemployed at a rate of 6.5 percent while black unemployment stood at 16.2 percent.²⁵ At the end of 1974, the Illinois Advisory Committee found that the overall unemployment rate in Alexander County was 14.7 percent with whites unemployed at a rate of 11.4 percent while blacks were unemployed at a rate of 28.4 percent.²⁶

The city and county governments have had little success in changing either the overall employment trends or the racial employment trends of the area. Although the city has provided services to industry locating in Cairo, according to the mayor, the City Council has no plan at present and no foreseeable plans in the future for actively seeking an additional economic base for the community.²⁷

25. U.S., *Commission on Civil Rights, Hearing Held in Cairo, Ill., Mar. 23-25, 1972, "Demographic, Economic, Social, and Political Characteristics of Cairo and Alexander County, Illinois,"* (1972), p. 347 (hereafter cited as *Demographic*).

26. Robert Burns, systems analyst, Bureau of Employment Security, Illinois State Employment Services, telephone interview, Feb. 26, 1975.

27. Walder interview.

Some encouragement comes, however, from the Pulaski-Alexander Development Corporation (PADCO) which has received State and Federal support in formulating a "total concept economic and industrial development plan" for the two-county area. The goal of the organization is to attract new industry, develop home grown industry, assist in the development of commercial and minority enterprise, and assist in the expansion and growth of all small business concerns. PADCO is governed by a completely biracial board of directors, one-half white and one-half black. Its current executive director, Richard Grigsby, is black.

PADCO's achievements include a long-range funding effort designed to keep the only hospital in Cairo from closing its doors, assistance to three major industries locating in the area, technical assistance to more than 20 companies and individuals obtaining loans for the operation of small businesses, and the completion of the total concept economic and industrial development plan.

PADCO has not been without its critics, however, and according to Economic Development Director William Cammack, the organization's economic development programs have not received the support of local officials which might be expected.²⁸

The Cairo City Council officially declined to support PADCO in 1970 voting to deny a \$10,000 grant to the organization on the grounds that the city could not afford to help a group seeking to attract new industry.²⁹ Since that time the city has assisted PADCO in the form of "free legal work" from time to time but has continued to decline financial aid.³⁰

28. William Cammack, economic development director, Pulaski-Alexander Development Corporation, interview in Cairo, Oct. 10, 1974 (hereafter cited as Cammack interview).

29. *Floodtide*, p. 72.

30. John Holland, legal counsel, city of Cairo, interview in Cairo, Oct. 9, 1974 (hereafter cited as Holland interview).

PADCO has been able to survive, in spite of the absence of total support from the white city officials of Cairo, by uniting whites and blacks under one roof in an attempt to solve their own problems. "Blacks and whites had not worked cooperatively together since 1937," commented life-long Cairo resident, Preston Ewing. "That was when they worked to sandbag the levee so the city wouldn't flood."³¹

Blacks and whites on the PADCO Board of Directors have revived the cooperative attitude of 1937 in another attempt to save their city.

31. Battlefield, p. 41.

HOUSING

Local, State and Federal officials have been ineffective in dealing with Cairo's most visible problem: housing. Governmental agencies have accomplished little through their programs to arrest the deteriorating housing in the city and provide decent housing for the large number of low and moderate income residents.

Public housing has been operated in a segregated manner by a white-dominated local housing authority. Appropriate government agencies have been ineffective for nearly 10 years in their attempts to require compliance by the housing authority with the law of the land.

In 1966 a spokesperson for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (then the U.S. Public Housing Authority) assured the Illinois Advisory Committee that "we are taking steps to remedy the situation, but it will take a little time for our remedy to be effective." (1966, p. 225)

By early 1974, however, the agency's remedy was still not visible. Public housing remained segregated, the housing authority remained dominated by whites, and employment by the housing authority continued to favor whites.

Nevertheless, segregated public housing in Cairo is on its way out due to the efforts of black residents who, with the aid of the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, filed a class action law suit in 1969 against the Alexander County Housing Authority. The U.S. Department of Justice later filed its own suit on the same matter and consolidated its efforts with those of the local residents. In October of 1974, the housing authority agreed to comply with a court-ordered plan to end public housing discrimination.³²

The plan requires that assignments to each public housing unit must be made on the basis of racial representation until a point is reached where the racial composition of each project reflects the racial composition of the population as a whole. Housing applicants who refuse assignments are placed at the end of the waiting list.

The court decree also guaranteed that at least two members of the five-member county housing board would be black and that all appointments to the Board would maintain that ratio. The housing authority also consented to the integration of its staff through the selection of a black to fill the next vacancy in the three-person leasing and occupancy staff. In addition, black employees of the maintenance staff were guaranteed equal opportunity for promotion to the position of maintenance supervisor, a position previously held by whites only.

What the local housing agency had steadfastly refused to do for years and HUD had been ineffective in doing for 9 years has been accomplished through the legal action of local citizens. Two blacks now sit on the governing board of the Alexander County Housing Authority, the former all-white project Elmwood Courts now has 30 black families in residence, and the formerly all-black Pyramid Court now has five white families in residence.

32. *U.S. v. Alexander County Housing Authority, Civ. No. CV73-76D (E.D. Illinois, October 1974).*

The previously all-white clerical positions within the public housing authority are being opened to blacks.³³

The Department of Housing and Urban Development has made a notable effort regarding contracts for a \$2.4 million modernization program for the two housing projects. In 1974 a conciliation agreement was drawn up between HUD, the Alexander County Housing Authority, and the Pyramid Courts Tenant Council. The tenant council had previously filed a formal complaint with HUD concerning the lack of minority employment in modernization contracts.³⁴

As a result, a number of subcontracts on the project have been granted to the tenants council itself, a major contract for the production of new roofs has been awarded to the Egyptian Housing Corp., headed by a black, and a black-owned firm from Chicago has received another of the contracts.³⁵ The efforts of the black tenants council, which initiated the original complaint against the housing authority, and the position taken by HUD that no money would be made available until the legitimate protests of the tenants were met have achieved gainful results for residents of the housing project. The recommendation of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights that the Alexander County Housing Authority comply with fair housing laws and regulations is becoming a reality, primarily through the efforts of Cairo's black residents.

The private housing market in Cairo, by contrast, historically has been integrated. However, housing conditions in many parts of the city are substandard, and the City Council has taken no action in the past to improve the situation, with the exception of demolition, and has formulated no housing plan for the future.

33. Seng Letter.

34. U.S., Department of Housing and Urban Development, Conciliation Agreement between the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development and The Pyramid Courts Tenants Council and Alexander County Housing Authority: Cairo, Illinois, Nov. 13, 1974.

35. Michael Seng, telephone interview, Feb. 24, 1975.

A private study of Cairo's housing completed in 1970 found that more than 50 percent of the units were deteriorating or dilapidated. The city ranked second of all comparable cities in the State in the percentage of substandard housing units. Since the early 1960s only a dozen new houses have been built in Cairo.³⁶

During the 1972 hearing, Mayor James Walder told the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights that the city had no plan for improving the housing situation. (1972, p. 583) Again in 1974, Mayor Walder told the Illinois Advisory Committee that the city had no housing plan, in effect and no plans for instituting one. He maintained, however, that the shortage of decent housing was a primary drawback in the city's future development and its ability to attract new industry and expand its economic base.³⁷

The Cairo City Council has not only declined to initiate its own housing program but it has stood in the way of efforts by private individuals attempting to improve the housing shortage. During 1971 and 1972, the biracial Egyptian Housing Corporation of Cairo submitted bids for purchase of vacant city-owned land on which the organization planned to build low-income housing. Whites opposed the plan, however, because the leadership of the Egyptian Housing Corporation included blacks who had also participated in the efforts of the United Front of Cairo to improve the economic conditions of blacks in the city.

Robert Cunningham, president of the United Citizen for Community Action (the successor organization to the "White Hats"), went before the City Council to oppose the housing development. Mr. Cunningham said he was expressing the opinion of "most people in Cairo" that while whites "are not

36. Demographic, pp. 342-344.

37. Walder Interview.

opposed to new housing, they are against any housing...controlled by the United Front." City Councilperson James Dale, in a written statement to the Cairo Evening Citizen, said, "I am opposed to having control of any housing development in the hands of the United Front, under its own or any other name."³⁸ The Cairo City Council responded to the wishes of the white community. The bids of the Egyptian Housing Corporation to purchase land for low- and moderate-income housing were denied. (1972, pp. 418, 419, 424)

The Egyptian Housing Development Corporation, however, was able to purchase other land, in its attempt to bring much needed housing to Cairo. Headed by local black residents, the not-for-profit corporation used seed money provided by the Illinois Housing Development Authority and the Farmers Home Administration Interest Credit Program to build and sell nearly 160 single family homes which low-income Cairo residents can purchase for \$65 to \$85 a month with no money down.

Representatives of the Egyptian Housing Corporation estimate that this housing will provide more than \$37,500 in new property taxes every year and that the homebuilding program circulated approximately \$9,840,000 in new money throughout the regional economy. The company also projected that at its present level of activity, 213 new housing units would be built in Alexander and the surrounding five counties during 1974-1975, creating 50 new jobs and providing \$20,402,500 in new money and \$85,200 in new property taxes. The building activity is also expected to produce such side benefits as increased training opportunities, growth of other area business, increased regional pride, and visible, sustained, economic activity in an area of the State which is used to experiencing only economic depression.³⁹

38. Cairo Evening Citizen, Mar. 22, 1971, and Apr. 15, 1971.

39. Brochure, Egyptian Housing Development Corporation, April 1974.

The City Council of Cairo continues to refuse to sell vacant land to the corporation or support the work of the corporation in any manner.⁴⁰

40. Van Ewing, executive director, Egyptian Housing Development Corporation, interview in Cairo, Oct. 11, 1974.

E D U C A T I O N

In 1966 the Illinois Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights heard testimony that an all-white school with an all-white faculty and staff was maintained in Cairo through the financial assistance of the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. (1966, pp. 42-48) Shortly thereafter, DHEW threatened to cut off funding to the Cairo School District unless it complied with Federal anti-discrimination laws. The school district responded to the DHEW demands and voluntarily began to desegregate its schools.

In 1972 the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights was informed that an all-white school with an all-white faculty and staff was once again operating in Cairo, supported through the financial assistance of the U.S. Internal Revenue Service. The school was not "private" and the Federal assistance was in the form of "tax exempt status" but the effect remained: Federal support of a totally segregated educational facility.⁴¹

The segregated school, Camelot, was organized by a number of local white residents in 1967 shortly after the public school system agreed to desegregate. With early enrollments of more than 300 students at

41. Symbol, pp. 19-20.

the elementary and secondary levels, Camelot made a heavy impact upon the operation of the public school system.⁴²

First, the drop in enrollment in the public schools (more than 20 percent during the first year of Camelot's operation) has caused a corresponding decrease in State money coming into the public school system since State funding in Illinois is calculated on a per pupil enrollment basis.⁴³

Second, the school district has been unable to generate local funds for its financial needs through increasing school taxes. Parents of Camelot students, already paying substantial amounts of money to send their children to private school, have strongly opposed and soundly defeated all school tax referendums in the district.⁴⁴

Third, the lack of funds has forced the school district to use Federal Special Education monies, including Emotionally Handicapped (EH), Educable Mentally Handicapped (EMH), and Trainable Mentally Handicapped (TMH) funds in order to keep the school system afloat. The money has enabled the district to pay its teachers, but it has brought with it the possibility that large numbers of students have been erroneously classified as requiring special education, a stigma which can remain with the student for years. (Dec. 1974, pp. 45-48)

In addition to the economic impact on the public school district, the existence of Camelot has inhibited racial harmony and racial equality. The isolation of white students from black students has eliminated the opportunity for any sort of interaction or educational understanding between

42. *Floodtide*, p. 38.

43. *Floodtide*, p. 42.

44. *Symbol*, p. 20.

the two cultures. In addition, Camelot students reported in 1972 that teachers at Camelot had made derogatory remarks about blacks during classroom discussions leading to further misconceptions and misunderstanding between races.⁴⁵

After its 1972 hearing, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights recommended that the Internal Revenue Service review its policy for determining tax exempt status of private schools, such as Camelot, which have exclusively white enrollments. The IRS has failed to make any change in its policy, and as a result, the nation's taxpayers continue to support financially the existence of Camelot.⁴⁶

The Commission also recommended additional ways for the school district to increase its economic stability including 1) funding under the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare's Emergency Aid Act of 1972 and, 2) changing the Illinois law to eliminate the financial disadvantage of school systems such as Cairo which have a tax base too low to support local school expenditures.⁴⁷

The school district applied for DHEW funds in the spring of 1973 and received \$399,000 for the 1973-74 school term. According to Gerald J. Bennett, DHEW's assistant regional director for Illinois and Minnesota, the funds are to improve educational opportunities and decrease racial isolation by providing counseling and remedial education in the areas of reading and arithmetic. The district received additional funding under the act for the 1974-75 school year. (Feb. 1974, special p. 1 following p. 61)

45. *Floodtide*, p. 37.

46. *Symbol*, p. 19.

47. *Symbol*, pp. 20, 21.

To assist school districts such as Cairo's, the Illinois Legislature passed Public Act 7820-7824 in 1973 creating a \$100 million a year capital assistance program for school districts with low tax bases to receive State grants for capital construction. Public Act 78-215 was passed in the same year, providing a new State formula which equalizes the amount of funds that each school district can receive. The new law increased Cairo's State support from \$607,815 in 1972-73 to \$779,610 in 1973-74. (Feb. 1974 special p. 7 following p. 61)

HEALTH

Health care in the Cairo area has not been improved during the past decade, and long-range planning by local, State, and Federal agencies has provided no concrete plan for future health care needs.

In both 1966 and 1972, the Illinois Advisory Committee and the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights documented the absence of adequate health care in Cairo and Alexander County. Local dentists refused to take black patients forcing them to travel up to 40 miles for dental care. The Federal Government terminated its financial support of the local health clinic operated by St. Mary's Hospital. The clinic for many of Cairo's poor residents was the only medical assistance available.⁴⁸ When the hospital was on the verge of collapse the city officials of Cairo failed to take any aggressive action to try to prevent its closing.⁴⁹

After its 1972 hearing the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights recommended that the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare survey the Cairo situation and draw up long-range plans to provide comprehensive health care for all citizens including the large number of low-income residents.

48. *Symbol*, p. 27.

49. *Cammack Interview*.

The Commission also recommended that DHEW establish programs to meet the immediate needs of the community and insure adequate health care.⁵⁰

In response to this recommendation, DHEW undertook a "planning effort intended to improve health care in southern Illinois," according to Gerald J. Bennett, DHEW's assistant regional director for Illinois and Minnesota. Less than two years later, however, Cairo had fewer health care facilities, with the closing of the St. Mary's Clinic, than it had before DHEW set about improving the situation.

DHEW's short-range goal has now been cut back to simply maintaining what is already there while the long-range plan has not yet emerged. "What we're doing short-term is just making sure that the hospital stays open," Mr. Bennett told the Advisory Committee. "What we're trying to do is get a long-range solution to problems down there. So what we're trying to do is lead toward a sort of regional approach to help in that area." (Feb. 1974, p. 81)

After 2 years of DHEW activity, the net result has been the closing of the health clinic in Cairo and a "sort of" regional concept of a health care delivery system.

Although little has been done by the responsible Federal agencies to improve health care in Cairo, local residents, through the biracial leadership of PADCO, have been able to prevent the health situation from reaching total chaos. In February 1973 the Sisters of Holy Cross, owners of St. Mary's Hospital in Cairo, met with the Governor of Illinois to discuss the financial problems in keeping the hospital open. Shortly thereafter, PADCO, with a \$400,000 short-term loan guaranteed in part by the Illinois Department of

50. Symbol, p. 27.

Agriculture, purchased the hospital and presently operates the facility. Long-term financing for the hospital was guaranteed by the U.S. Farmers Home Administration. (Feb. 1974, special p. 4 following p. 191)

The State, through its Comprehensive Health Planning Agency, assisted the hospital by granting \$40,000 to Southern Illinois University to develop a model rural health care delivery system, to recruit physicians to the area, and to provide medical back-up support to the hospital. Through this grant four physicians were recruited to work in the PADCO Hospital on a revolving basis.

Although the hospital is by no means entirely out of financial trouble, according to William Cammack of PADCO, it is functioning to serve the present emergency needs of Cairo and the 22,000 residents of Alexander County.

The inability of blacks to receive dental care in Cairo has not changed. The Illinois Department of Registration and Education has failed to conduct an adequate investigation of discriminatory practices by Cairo dentists as recommended by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

Evidence that two white dentists in Cairo discriminate against black patients has accumulated since the first hearing in Cairo in 1966. The charges of discrimination were confirmed by the dentists' own testimony before the Commission in 1972 when each admitted that they refer black patients to other dentists, that they take only whites as new patients, and that they had never taken a black as a regular full-time patient. (1972 pp. 617, 620, 627, 630)

Rule III of the Illinois Rules and Regulations Promulgated for the Administration of the Illinois Dental Practices Act prohibits discrimination on the part of dentists practicing in the State.⁵¹ The

⁵¹. *Ill. Rev. Stats. ch 91§ 56 et seq.*

Department of Registration and Education, the State agency responsible for enforcing the regulations, has failed to take appropriate action.

The department's director, Ronald Stackler, told the Advisory Committee in 1974 that an investigation of a Cairo dentist was made in response to the recommendations of the 1972 hearing of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. (Dec. 1974, p. 143)

The department's records indicate, however, that only one investigation has ever been carried out in Cairo, and that was in response to an individual complaint filed in February 1972 prior to the Commission's hearing. According to Mark A. Orlich, chief of investigation of the Department of Registration and Education, the investigation was completed and closed April 15, 1972.⁵² The transcript of the Commission's hearing was not published until June 1972, however, more than 45 days after the case had been closed and the Commission's recommendations were not issued until the following February. Thus, the department could not have initiated its case on ~~the information and recommendations of the Commission.~~

However, no action was taken by the department after the publication of the Commission's findings which included the sworn testimony of Cairo dentists that they provided services only to new white patients and refused their services to new black patients.

52. Mark A. Orlich, chief of investigation, Department of Registration and Education, letter to Commission staff, Jan. 31, 1973.

L A W E N F O R C E M E N T

No action has been taken by local, State or Federal officials to prevent a recurrence of the breakdown of law and justice which occurred in Cairo during the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the absence of the "clear and present danger" which then existed, officials have declined to take any necessary or appropriate remedial steps.

~~Blacks still do not participate in the~~ decision-making process for local law enforcement efforts. Only two blacks are on the active police force of Cairo and no blacks sit on the City Council which has overall authority over the police department.⁵³

The City Council and the police department have failed to utilize any of the recommendations made in the 1970 study of the Cairo Police Department by the highly respected International Association of Chiefs of Police. The report made more than 200 specific recommendations for improving the policies and practices of the department.⁵⁴

53. *Walder Interview.*

54. *Floodtide, p. 30.*

The city and the police department have refused to accept money made available by the Illinois Law Enforcement Commission for the operation of a police-community relations program or to set up such a program on an independent basis. (Dec. 1974, p. 80)

The City Council has also failed to follow a recommendation of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights that the council pass a resolution clearly stating its intention to insure the independence of the Cairo Police Department. The council has also failed to follow a Commission recommendation that it assist the chief of police with a wide-ranging program to upgrade and reform the department.⁵⁵

The Governor of Illinois and the State legislature have failed to act on a Commission recommendation to establish an emergency law enforcement control program to provide State control of certain local functions in the event local police officials fail to properly fulfill their law enforcement obligations.⁵⁶

In the absence of adequate local law enforcement, Cairo residents have turned to the State police for protection. Black residents of Cairo charge, however, that the State police have also failed to protect the city's population and have actually participated in illegal actions against certain citizens. "The State police inevitably take sides with the city police department and the City Council," said Cairo NAACP President Preston Ewing, "no matter how wrong they might be or whose rights they might violate."⁵⁷ In 1969, for example, the mayor of Cairo declared that "gatherings of...two or more individuals is prohibited" and "no person shall take part in...a parade or engage

55. Michael Seng, interview in Cairo, Oct. 11, 1974.

56. Ibid.

57. Preston Ewing, Jr., President, Cairo NAACP, interview in Cairo, Oct. 10, 1974.

in any picketing." When the State police were called in by the city, they responded by preventing blacks from participating in peaceful protests and arrested many for violating the mayor's "law".

Shortly thereafter the courts ruled that the so-called law was clearly unconstitutional and freed all those who had been illegally arrested. Black residents continued to condemn the State police, however, for their complicity in the arrests and their unquestioning support of the City Council and the city police.⁵⁸

"I am not an attorney and can't pretend to be one," Dwight Pitman, superintendent of the State police, told the Illinois Advisory Committee in 1974, "but it's my impression that its a rule of law that until a [local] law has been held to be unconstitutional, it must be assumed to be constitutional." (Dec. 1974, p. 117)

According to Mr. Pitman, the department has taken no measures to alter such automatic support ~~of local officials or local laws no matter what~~ the impact of those laws might be upon certain elements of the community.

The relative quiet in Cairo during the past 2 years has not "tested" the local or State police and the consequences of inaction by local and State authorities is not readily apparent. The lack of affirmative action has done little to increase the confidence of the local community in its police force, however, and the underlying currents of mistrust continue to linger among Cairo residents.⁵⁹

58. Brinton, "Confrontation," pp. 10-14.

59. Seng and P. Ewing' interviews.

THE CAIRO EXPERIENCE--
SOME CONCLUSIONS

During its 1966 informal hearing in Cairo, 84-year-old Mrs. Rosie Bryant told the Illinois Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, "Listen, I don't see a bit of difference now than I did way back in '51 or '52 in the civil rights. It ain't got to us - not the civil rights. I reckon it's on its way but it ain't got here yet."

The impact of civil rights legislation has still not reached Cairo nearly a decade later.

Employment discrimination continues to be practiced by local governments because the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has not yet processed its discrimination charges. The Federal Government continues to fund construction contractors who practice discrimination because "changes come slow." The State Fair Employment Practices Commission admits it has done "nothing" to end discrimination in Cairo because it does not have the money or legislative authority to take effective action. Discrimination by members of the medical profession continues because the State has failed to investigate the charges.

The City Council of Cairo lets its attitudes towards blacks stand in the way of selling vacant property to a corporation willing and able to build desperately needed low-income housing for the city's poor.

A segregated, all-white school continues to operate in Cairo through the support of a federally sponsored tax exempt status while the public school system nears financial ruin.

The paternalistic attitudes of whites, described in the 1969 report of the Special House Committee of the Illinois Legislature, continue to exist. City attorney John Holland claims that what Cairo needs is "a better class of black people."⁶⁰ Mayor James Walder finds only "15 or 20 colored men" who have the appropriate qualifications to fit "my limited colored pool" of blacks eligible for appointment to positions on city boards or agencies.⁶¹

In spite of the failures of these governmental agencies, blacks in Cairo have accomplished a great deal during the past decade. The biracial board of directors and black administrative staff of the Egyptian Housing Corporation have successfully overcome the roadblocks of the City Council and have provided low-income housing for both poor whites and poor blacks in Cairo. The jobs, tax dollars, and economic base created by the corporation rank among the area's most notable achievements during the decade.

The biracial board of directors and staff of the Pulaski-Alexander Development Corporation have successfully negotiated loans for more than 20 small businesses in Cairo, assisted 3 large corporations locating in the area, and have taken over the operations of the local hospital, preventing its closing.

60. *Holland Interview.*

61. *Floodtide*, p. 77.

The black leadership of the Pyramid Courts tenants council, with the legal assistance of the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law and the Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation, initiated court proceedings which put an end to discrimination in public housing in Cairo, won positions for blacks on the county housing authority and opened up more jobs to blacks on the housing authority staff.

The Illinois Advisory Committee concludes that the element of success in each of these achievements has been the emergence of black leadership from within the black community (as opposed to leadership figures hand picked by whites) and the willingness of private and governmental agencies to recognize that leadership and make the necessary funds and support available for the black community to pursue its own goals and ends.

In particular the Advisory Committee commends the leadership of the Egyptian Housing Corporation, the Pyramid Courts tenants council, (now called the Pyramid Courts Housing Council), and PADCO along with those agencies which provided funding or assistance including: the Illinois Housing Development Authority and the Farmers Home Administration for seed money and mortgage insurance made available to Egyptian Housing Corporation; the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for its efforts regarding the formal complaint filed by the Pyramid Courts tenants council; the Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation, and the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law for their legal aid to the tenants council and other black organizations and individuals; the Illinois Department of Agriculture for its guarantee of a short-term loan to PADCO, used to purchase and keep open the hospital; the Illinois Comprehensive Health Planning Agency for its grant to assist PADCO in recruiting physicians for the hospital; and to the Economic Development Administration of the U.S. Department of Commerce for its technical assistance grants to PADCO.

The past decade in Cairo indicates that if that city is to have a future it will come about only when the black community is recognized and supported in its efforts to play a determining role in the government and economics of the city.