

# Orphans and Old Folks Revisited,

## *Introduction and Annotation* by Paul D. Nelson

IN FALL 1998 this magazine published my article, “Orphans and Old Folks.”<sup>1</sup> The piece told the story of the Crispus Attucks Home, a combined orphanage and old folks’ home operated in St. Paul from 1906 to 1966 by and for African Americans. When I submitted the final manuscript to *Minnesota History*, I felt sure I had the story of this unique Minnesota institution complete. Of course I knew that I did not have the full story, for most of that had long since died with those who had lived and worked at Crispus Attucks. But I was confident that nothing new would come to light. I was wrong.

One day in mid-June 2000, more than 18 months after my article came out, a small brown envelope appeared in my mailbox. It contained a letter and a cassette tape. The letter came from Dr. David Taylor, dean of



The Crispus Attucks Colored Orphanage and Old Folks Home in St. Paul, about 1911

with a Story by Lloyd L. Brown



General College at the University of Minnesota, whose dissertation is the single most important work on black history in St. Paul: "Pilgrim's Progress: Black St. Paul and the Making of an Urban Ghetto, 1870-1930." Dr. Taylor had read "Orphans and Old Folks" and now had information that might interest me. His tape preserved an interview that he had done a month earlier with a man named Lloyd L. Brown. As a child, Mr. Brown had lived in the Crispus Attucks Home.

I was amazed. In all the many hours I had spent working on the Attucks story, it had never occurred to me that any of the orphans might still be alive. The place had ceased accepting children in the early 1920s, more than 75 years before I began my research, and the people I had interviewed for the article, whose knowledge went back half a century, assured me that the last known residents were long dead. Now I held in my hand an unexpected voice from the past, and I slid the tape into the player with mixed feelings of anticipation and fear: what if I had gotten the story wrong?

The tape proved to be a delight. Mr. Brown sounded much younger than his now 88 years, and his memory remained sharp. After his mother died, he had been placed in Crispus Attucks in 1918 and stayed until some time in 1920.<sup>2</sup> He remembered people, stories, details, and even tastes and textures from 80 years ago, and he recounted them with zest. As I listened I thought, "If only I'd had this tape when I was writing the article." Except for a detail here and there, nothing he said contradicted what I had written, but he brought a priceless and entertaining insider's perspective to an institution the likes of which we will never see again.

I had written that life for children in the Crispus



**Lloyd Brown, 1927; Crispus Attucks' location in Brown's day, the former Home for the Friendless on Collins (now Tedesco) Street in St. Paul's Railroad Island neighborhood**

Attucks Home was "somewhat spartan." For Mr. Brown this phrase is an understatement: he prefers the word "bleak." Attucks residents were poor, sometimes appallingly so. The children rarely had decent clothes. Shoes, when residents had them, were ill-fitting castoffs often lined with cardboard or paper to cover holes in their soles. Bad shoes gave young Brown such frostbite ("chilblains," he called it) one winter that he tied strings around his toes because the "counter pain was better than the itch" of frostbite. The children's attire gave them away as charity cases to people in the neighborhood and to the other children at school. Poverty disturbed even their slumbers: bedbugs infested their tick mattresses and tormented them at night.<sup>3</sup>

The only information I had been able to find about the food served at Crispus Attucks came from a 1946 inspector's report. Food seemed to be plentiful then and was mostly purchased from the local grocery. This was not the case during Mr. Brown's stay. Then the Attucks organization relied on charitable donations, in money and in kind, mostly from St. Paul's black community. Although need was constant, donations were sporadic. So when there was money, or plentiful gifts of

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food, or the Attucks garden produced well, the residents ate well. But when resources got thin and hand-outs did not come, nutrition declined to a level of misery. The homemade bread at Attucks remains, to Lloyd Brown, the best he ever enjoyed. But sometimes the only bread they could get had been discarded from bakeries and scavenged by the old folks who feared going hungry. While the Attucks matron sliced off the mold and fed the rest of the loaf to the children, no amount of slicing, said Brown, could disguise the moldy taste. In these hard times an elderly resident would regularly journey to the South St. Paul stockyards for a sack of bones and chicken feet to be cooked for broth

and whatever rubbery flesh the orphans and old folks could detach from the bones. This might be their only food for days on end. "We had to eat something," Brown says, but even recalling "the smell of it now is physically upsetting to me." After more than 80 years, Lloyd Brown still remembers: "The food supply was really dreadful. We were lucky to survive."<sup>4</sup>

"Orphans and Old Folks" noted that many white organizations, church groups especially, supported the Crispus Attucks Home with donations and came to visit at Christmas time, often bearing gifts. Brown recalls bitterly a time when a white choir stood outside the home ("They wouldn't have come *in* the place") and sang

"Inmates" of Crispus Attucks, entry 469, who ranged in age from 98 to 4, including Lloyd Dight (Brown) and his siblings, from the 1920 U.S. Census

PLACE OF ABODE.				NAME of each person whose place of abode on January 1, 1920, was in this family. Enter surname first, then the given name and middle initial, if any. Include every person living on January 1, 1920. Omit children born since January 1, 1920.	RELATION. Relationship of this person to the head of the family.	TENURE.		PERSONAL DESCRIPTION.					CITIZENSHIP.		EDUCATION.		Place of birth of each person	
Street, house, or farm no.	House number or farm no. (See Instructions)	Number of dwelling house in order of visitation.	Number of family in order of visitation.			Head and or tenant.	If owned, free or mortgaged.	Sex.	Color or race.	Age at last birthday.	Single, married, widowed, divorced.	Year of immigration to the United States.	Naturalized or alien.	If naturalized, year of naturalization.	Attended school as indicated on page 1-11-13.	Whether able to read.	Whether able to write.	Place of birth.
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
	475	371	400	Crispus Dominic	Roomer.	M	W	29	S	1911	al						Italy	note
		362	552	Louise Potes	Roomer.	W	W	29	S	1906	kn						Italy	note
	469	374	401	Holt, Hattie.	Head of	0	W	13	38	M.					yes	yes.	Texas	
		363	553	R. I.	Husband.	M	B	40	M.						yes	yes.	Mississippi	
				Camel Leberd	Inmate.	M	B	70	M						yes	yes.	Kentucky	
				Reves, John B.	Inmate	M	B	84	M.								Ohio	
				Singleton, Wm.	Inmate	M	B	84	wd								S. Carolina	
				Johnson, W. M.	Inmate	M	B	68	wd						no	no.	Missouri	
				Smith, Septimus	Inmate.	M	B	57	S.						no	no	Alabama.	
				Wright, Elizabeth	Inmate.	F	B	70	wd.								Missouri	
				Brown, Mary E.	Inmate. Housemaid.	F	B	60	wd.								New York	
				Pearson, Julia.	Inmate.	F	B	70	wd.						yes	yes.	Mississippi	
				Bloch, Mattie	Inmate.	F	B	60	wd						yes	yes.	Alabama	
				Pearson, Mary.	Inmate	F	B	64	wd.								Maryland	
				Younger, Uldine	Inmate	F	B	14	S.						yes	yes	yes.	Missouri
				Gasmann	Inmate.	F	B	18	S.						yes	yes	yes.	Missouri
				Dight, Dorothy	Inmate	F	B	95	S						yes	yes	yes.	Minnesota
				Ralph.	Inmate	M	B	9	S.						yes			Minnesota
				Margaret	Inmate	F	B	4	S									Minnesota
				Joseph.	Inmate	M	B	6	S.						yes			Minnesota
				Olivia Vernon.	Inmate	M	B	49	S									Minnesota
				Smith, John	Inmate.	M	B	13	S.						yes	yes	yes.	Oklahoma
				Breeding, Virgil.	Inmate.	M	B	44	S						yes			Texas
				W. Ford.	Inmate.	M	B	7	S						no			Texas
				Robert.	Inmate.	M	B	8	S						no			Texas
				Warrene	Inmate	M	B	12	S						yes	yes	yes.	Texas
	455	372	402	Milner, Jos. W.	Head of	1	R	4	W	57	M.				yes	yes	yes.	Missouri
		364	554		Head of	1	R	4	W	58	M.				yes	yes	yes.	Missouri

“Joy to the World.” Their world might have been joyous, but not his. Not even the Christmas gifts brought pleasure, for the young Brown never received one not already broken. Brown saw no charity in these acts, only hypocrisy. “They thought they were doing something good,” he says, “but you know they were not doing anything.” He felt shame at having to receive from such people, then anger: “I still get mad thinking about it.” Brown’s memory resonates with an emotional truth unavailable to me when I wrote the article.

The “Orphans and Old Folks” story recounted a failed attempt to segregate Attucks children attending Mattocks School when the home was located in what is now the Highland Park neighborhood of St. Paul. Later, during Brown’s time, the Attucks children attended Lincoln School, just a block away from the home in the neighborhood called Railroad Island. Although there was no attempt at segregation, Brown remembers race being a constant issue. Though he was fair enough to pass for white, he says, the other children knew where he lived and drew the inescapable conclusion. He endured racial names, taunts, and gibes and learned to fight.

Brown remembers good times, too, especially the relations between the children and the old folks, most of whom had lived in slavery and told stories of those distant times. “I was closer to the old folks than I was to the other children. I have never known people with such dignity as those former slaves, men and women whose spirit was so utterly compassionate and humane.” These people repaid the young boy’s interest in them with solicitude of their own. His good work in school “brought showers of praise upon me,” one of the few joys in this time of his life. To my eyes, the aged figures that appear in early photos of the Crispus Attucks Home are unfathomable visitors from a vanished past. Brown’s memories help bring them to life.<sup>5</sup>

**ONLY A FRACTION** of Brown’s tape deals with his life at Crispus Attucks. In the rest of it, equally fascinating, Brown tells other tales of his youth. Because I have an interest in St. Paul history of that period, I wrote him with questions; he responded, and soon we developed a regular exchange of letters. It turns out that not only is Lloyd Brown one of the last survivors of Crispus Attucks (he has an *older* brother who also lived there); he is also one of the most interesting twentieth-century sons of St. Paul.

Brown was born Lloyd Dight in 1913, son of an African American waiter from Alabama, Ralph Dight, and a German American farm girl from Stearns County, Magdalena Paul. His mother died when he was four, and his father, unable or unwilling to care for four young children, sent them all to Crispus Attucks. But because the children were Catholic, parishioners of St. Peter Claver Church, Dight later moved the boys to the Catholic Orphan Asylum in Minneapolis and the girls to a boarding school in Baltimore. In the mid-1920s Lloyd and his brother moved back to St. Paul, attending school and living on their own with money supplied by their father.<sup>6</sup>

The adolescent Lloyd Dight would have been his mother’s pride. He devoured books (especially adventure books) at the public library, got good grades at Cathedral School, was chosen president of his eighth-grade class, served as an altar boy at the St. Paul Cathedral, and sang in the choir. Moving on to Cretin High School, he participated in military training, proudly wearing the puttees and high-button tunics of the U.S. Army.

Then, in his midteen years, everything quickly changed: Lloyd Dight began to question authority. In catechism class he asked questions the instructor considered sacrilegious. A severe reprimand proved his breaking point. Having been neglected for years by his father and now rejected by his school (and, by implication, the Church that ran it), Dight rebelled against his own past. He quit Cretin High and resolved to leave St. Paul forever when the opportunity came.

He spent the next year at the public library (“my real education,” he calls this period) reading and thinking about what he read. He joined the Young Workers’ League, a Communist organization, and acquired a subversive friend, a wandering Irish lad who had been a Wobbly (a member of the syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World). In the fall of 1929 Dight and his friend hopped an eastbound freight train, beginning a wilder and more profound adventure than the St. Paul boy could ever have imagined. Their destination was Youngstown, Ohio, where they hoped to find work in the steel mills. They arrived just in time for the October stockmarket crash and the massive layoffs that followed. Instead of finding a job in the mills, Dight found work among the workers. By the spring of 1930, the 16-year-old had become a Communist labor agitator and organizer. Not long after that, he took the

surname Brown in tribute to the most radical of all American rebels, the despised and executed John Brown. In just a few months the former Cathedral altar boy had become a triple threat to the American Way: Negro, union man, Red. Like his idol, Lloyd Brown put his life at risk for his cause: the steel companies of Youngstown did not hesitate to fight unions with police, thugs, and guns.

Despite the perils, Brown spent the next decade as a Communist organizer in Ohio, New Jersey, Connecticut, and western Pennsylvania. He also visited the workers' paradise of Stalin's Soviet Union. In 1941 his political work landed him a stretch in jail in Pittsburgh. After release he joined the army, where he rose to the rank of sergeant in an all-black unit. After the war Brown continued to fight fascism, as he saw it, now with the pen. He wrote for, then helped edit, the weekly *New Masses* and then its successor, the monthly *Masses and Mainstream*, Communist journals published in New York City.

Had young Lloyd Dight's former teachers followed his literary career—which they certainly did not—they would have been proud, at least if they could find a way to put aside the political content of his work. As a journalist Brown wrote on many subjects, ranging from lynching and labor organizing to baseball (he loved Jackie Robinson's Brooklyn Dodgers) and popular culture, including a comic piece describing the day he spent listening to the radio from sign-on to sign-off. He wrote editorials, too, and in all his pieces showed himself an excellent stylist with the priceless gift of brevity. One of his colleagues called him a literary miniaturist.



**As seen in his 1927 eighth-grade photo, Brown (front row, third from left) and one other black student attended St. Paul's Cathedral Hill School at College Avenue and Old Kellogg Boulevard. This is Brown's earliest photo of himself.**



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**Brown (1953 portrait) edited and wrote for several influential Leftist publications in New York, including *Masses and Mainstream*, whose editors included Herbert Aptheker, W. E. B. DuBois, Howard Fast, Paul Robeson, and Meridel Le Sueur.**

As managing editor of *New Masses* from March 1946 until its demise in 1948 and then as associate editor of *Masses and Mainstream*, Brown worked with some of the greatest figures of the midcentury Left and of U.S. and European intellectual life in general. They included the soon-to-be-blacklisted screenwriter Dalton Trumbo, poet Pablo Neruda, historian Herbert Aptheker, playwright Lorraine Hansberry, the Minnesota poet and writer Meridel Le Sueur, novelist Howard Fast, and the titanic W. E. B. DuBois and Paul Robeson.

Brown and Robeson became friends, and in 1952 Brown left both *Masses and Mainstream* and the Communist Party to work with Robeson as a writer and editor, most notably as a collaborator in Robeson's autobiography, *Here I Stand*. In 1976 he published a pamphlet, *Paul Robeson Rediscovered*, and in 1994 a partial biography, *The Young Paul Robeson, On My Journey Now*, winner of the 1998 Carey McWilliams Award for outstanding scholarly work in cultural diversity in the United States.<sup>7</sup>

Mr. Brown has from time to time turned his experiences into literature. In 1951 he published a novel, *Iron City*, based on his experiences in Pittsburgh's Allegheny County Jail in 1941. There from inside the jail he and others mounted a campaign to try to save fellow inmate Willie Jones, framed for a murder and sentenced to death. In 1946 and 1947 he published short

stories, "Jericho USA" and "Battle in Canaan," based on his experiences in the army during World War II.<sup>8</sup>

In April of 1948 *Masses and Mainstream* printed another work of his, this one called "God's Chosen People." It is a fictionalized memoir, or fragment of a memoir, of Brown's life at the Crispus Attucks Home. At the time he wrote it, he had lost all contact with St. Paul. He had no idea then that the institution that had been his early boyhood home still existed, still in the same building, and would carry on for 18 years more. This story may be the only fictional account ever published of early twentieth-century African American life in St. Paul.<sup>9</sup>

*Minnesota History* takes pleasure now in bringing to light, for the first time in more than 50 years, a unique piece of Minnesota literature, "God's Chosen People."

Last October Mr. Brown wrote me a note that began, "It occurs to me that as a researcher into the long-buried story of the Crispus Attucks Home, you are like an archeologist who digs into an ancient tomb and bumps into a live mummy—me."<sup>10</sup> It is an apt metaphor, for mummies tell us a great deal about the past, and the very-much-alive Lloyd Brown has many tales still to tell. He is working now on his autobiography. It is going pretty well, he wrote me, but he wishes he were 80 again. It promises to be a great American story; I can't wait to read it.





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