

# “In That Very Northern City”

## RECOVERING A FORGOTTEN STRUGGLE FOR RACIAL INTEGRATION IN DULUTH

**Chad Montrie**

Following the lynching in Duluth of three black circus workers on a June night in 1920, the Lake Superior port was featured briefly in the national news. This included an editorial in the *New York Times* that typically centered on what the ghastly murders meant for distinguishing the American North from the American South. “In that very northern city,” it explained, “there were certain variations which may or may not have been due to the moderating effects on temper of a high latitude.”

Most notably, members of the “mob” attempted to conduct their own “semblance of judicial proceedings,” sparing three of the six men they had taken from prison cells. But, the editorial insisted, the white northerners’ familiar frenzied reaction to the purported rape of a white woman by several black men showed that “human nature is much the same in both sections of the country.” Even city leaders’ unusual promise to try to punish the perpetrators was “dubious,” the paper concluded, and surely

there would be no consequences for the 5,000 residents who gathered to watch, “all as guilty, morally, as those who pulled the avenging rope.”<sup>1</sup>

As it turned out, the *Times* proved to be mostly correct about the likelihood of holding those implicated in the lynching accountable. In trials that began later in August, just three white men were convicted only of riot or inciting a riot, and one surviving black circus worker was convicted of rape. Subsequently, as Duluth receded from the headlines, the city’s racial order was left largely intact. Although the lynching motivated black and white residents of Duluth to organize a branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and provoked the state legislature to pass



an antilynching law, it also led to the founding of one of the largest Ku Klux Klan Klaverns in the state and caused a hardening of the color line. Facing these deteriorating conditions, as well as job loss during the Great Depression, African Americans fled, shrinking their population from a high of 416 in 1930 (among 101,000 residents) to 314 a decade later (among a total population that remained virtually unchanged). Meanwhile, those who remained were excluded from living in all but a few sections of the city and limited to working in a handful of menial occupations.<sup>2</sup>

It was not until the early 1960s that Duluth began to see any significant progress toward racial equality. This shift coincided with the arrival of a particularly outspoken African American couple from Chicago, Matthew (Matt) and Helen Carter; a change in leadership of the NAACP chapter, when local black university lab superintendent William Maupins became president; and the emergence of white Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Thomas L. Smith as a bold advocate for civil rights. Working together, these individuals challenged the city's residential segregation by attempting to move the Carters into an all-white neighborhood along the lakefront, starting with Smith acting as a straw purchaser to buy a lot and gaining momentum with Maupins invoking Minnesota's new fair housing law. Not surprisingly, white residents put up obstinate opposition, from specious petitions at public zoning meetings to repeated acts of nighttime vandalism. In the end, however, the Carter family was permitted to build their house, and eventually some neighbors even befriended the couple, including the

FACING: *The Carter family of Duluth, ca. 1969.*  
L to R: Tony, Bill, Kai, Helen, and Matt.

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man who had originally refused to sell his land to them.

Recovering the forgotten history of this fair housing effort is worthwhile if only to recognize a set of deserving activists for their principled challenge to Duluth's deeply rooted patterns of discrimination. Just as importantly, though, it also reveals the extent of racism in a small industrial town in the far reaches of the Upper Midwest, a region often overlooked because the history of racism in the South and in large metropolitan areas of the North looms so large. Likewise, while acknowledging local, state, and federal policies that enabled residential segregation, Duluth's racial history reveals the complex mix of violence, routine intimidation, realtor deceit, and other extralegal methods that helped to maintain a color line, resulting in widespread segregation in housing and jobs paradoxically complemented by a commonly held blinding historical amnesia. And finally, the lake port activists' story shows how integration campaigns (at least sometimes) played out in places like Duluth, not without organization and struggle yet not with the widespread community mobilization and high drama of civil rights battles elsewhere.<sup>3</sup>

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### **FROM MISSISSIPPI TO MINNESOTA**

Matt Carter was like many other African Americans of his generation, starting with humble roots in the rural Deep South and dramatically

altering his life's course by migrating to the urban North. Shortly after he was born in Laurel, Mississippi, in 1926, his father, John, abandoned the family for Gulfport, and his mother, Cleo, moved their four children to Christian Springs to be near her brother and work as a farm laborer. One day, when the caretaker there violently struck Matt's older brother for refusing to work for him, their angry mother insulted the man. Later that night, a group of men dressed in white sheets and carrying torches came by, threatening to burn the family alive inside their house, so she moved the family again. By 1938, they were living in Flora, growing cotton on shares, and Matt intermittently attended the local segregated school, acquiring only a third-grade education by the time he was a teenager. Two years later, Cleo moved everyone once more, to Jackson, where her brother had gone, and Matt got a job at a commercial laundry. Initially, he sorted soiled hospital sheets and towels with the other black employees, but in time his employer assigned him to work alongside whites, moving and loading trucks, yet earning less than his coworkers.<sup>4</sup>

Just as World War II was ending, one of Matt's cousins convinced him to come to Chicago to join a galley crew on a lake freighter, the *Homer D. Williams*. This job paid significantly better than what he had been making at the laundry, although the boats were also segregated. African Americans were allowed to be only stewards, cooks, and porters. All

other carrier positions were reserved for whites. What's more, the work was seasonal. In the winter, when the lakes iced up and crews returned to port, Carter lived with his aunt and her family at 1250 South Spaulding Avenue, on Chicago's west side, working at a steel mill. One year during this time, his cousin decided to get married to a woman in Columbus, Mississippi, and the young men went back south for the wedding. Matt was best man and among the bridal party he was paired with Helen Lewis.<sup>5</sup>

Helen was born July 21, 1921, to Tommy and Daisy Lewis, one of twelve siblings. Her father was a fireman on the Columbus and Greenville Railway, while her mother took care of the housekeeping and childcare, and they were a family of at least some means. Helen was able to attend primary school as well as high school and enroll at nearby Rust College, in Holly Springs, a historically black institution founded by Methodist missionaries following the Civil War. After graduating she took a job as a teacher and became involved with civil rights activism, working with an NAACP chapter to challenge white opposition to black voting. By the time she met Matt she also had a child, Anthony (Tony), from a previous marriage, and she had moved back home with her infant son. She married Matt in 1953, and the next year moved with him to Chicago.<sup>6</sup>

The apartment the new couple lived in for the next six years was in one of the first Lake Meadows buildings, a private "urban renewal" project on the South Side underwritten by the New York Life Company and the first (intentionally) racially integrated housing constructed in the city. Matt and Helen joined the NAACP meetings held in the building and, since the Democratic Party precinct captain lived there too, they became politically active. Meanwhile,



*Helen and Matt Carter.*

Matt continued working on lake boats, shipping out from Milwaukee, and Helen found a job teaching, moving through several different schools in Chicago. They kept to this arrangement until June 1960, when Helen packed up their household goods and brought Tony with her to meet Matt in Duluth, where it would be easier for him to work on the lakes and more often be with his family and where he had already rented a new apartment for them.<sup>7</sup>

## DULUTH'S COLOR LINE

Wedged between the Mesabi Iron Range and Lake Superior, Duluth nurtured an economy dominated by steel, mining, and shipping during most of the twentieth century. The single-largest employer was Minnesota Steel, owned by the US Steel Corporation, along with its two subsidiaries, the Oliver Mining Company and the Pittsburgh Steamship Company. In fact, at least a quarter of the city's African American population had come to work at the steel plant, before and after World War I, encouraged by recruiters who scoured the South promising good jobs to all. Unbeknownst to these transplants until

later, however, part of the company's motivation for recruiting them was to suppress demands for increased wages and hinder a union campaign. Company owners assumed that black workers would accept lower pay and not be inclined to organize, and very likely this calculated policy of creating and maintaining racial division stoked white anger.<sup>8</sup>

Although Minnesota Steel had built company housing in Morgan Park in 1915, and company officials publicly declared that they would allow "no race segregation" there, in practice the area was reserved exclusively for white employees. Most African American employees lived in what black steelworker Edward Nichols referred to as "tumbledown shacks" in an adjacent "shantytown" called Gary. Among the more than 100 African American residents, 40 of the 50 men worked as laborers in the coke plant, doing some of the most grueling and dangerous jobs, at some of the lowest pay rates, as well as for lesser hourly rates than whites doing the same tasks. Only one held a foreman's position, presumably supervising the black cohort. Similarly, while just a handful of the men's wives worked outside the home, those who did had to settle for poorly paid manual labor. The color line also showed up in the way workers and their families spent their leisure time, with the Morgan Park Good Fellowship Clubhouse closed to African Americans, even though they paid monthly dues for it; the clubhouse included a "burnt-cork" group that regularly performed "black face" minstrel shows.<sup>9</sup>

Elsewhere in the city, African Americans were clustered in the Central Hillside, East Hillside, and Downtown areas, barred from the surrounding white areas. Some of the men worked in galley crews on seagoing vessels or lake boats and others worked for the railroads doing

dining car service and cooking. One or two prepared engines at a roundhouse, where they were routinely passed over for promotion to better positions like fireman. About 60 men and women worked at Erwin Oreck's exclusive Flame Night Club, employed as servers, cooks, busboys, doormen, and washroom attendants. Additionally, some women were housemaids for wealthy white families, while other men were custodians at schools and banks. A fortunate number (up to 20 at one point) worked at the post office, these positions often more reliable because they were federal jobs. Tellingly, however, there was only one black dentist (who eventually left), a couple of black lawyers (who worked out of their homes), and one black police officer. And compounding all of this, most downtown restaurants would not serve African Americans, including Oreck's club, while movie theaters restricted blacks to seats in the first rows or up in the balcony.<sup>10</sup>

In these ways, Duluth's racial order was both unlike and like towns and cities throughout Minnesota. One significant difference was the size of the black population, which was significantly larger than in places

like Austin, another industrial town, where there were only a dozen African Americans in a total population of more than 12,000 in 1920. Within a decade, there were half as many, after whites violently expelled black strikebreakers during a railroad strike and several black residents subsequently left. As was the case in Duluth, though, those who remained were limited to menial occupations such as shining shoes, and none were employed at the unionized Hormel meatpacking plant. On the other hand, in the Twin Cities, where many blacks went after leaving towns like Austin, their population was much larger, numbering 3,376 in St. Paul and 3,927 in Minneapolis by 1920. Still, like African Americans in Duluth, these residents clustered in only a few different areas, disallowed by whites from living in most sections

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of each city, and the great majority of them rented. Employment opportunities for black men and women were similarly limited to menial occupations. In a 1926 survey, nearly two-thirds of Minneapolis employers said they would not hire "colored workers," half of them because they believed the mixing of races was "undesirable." This was much the same sentiment whites in the Lake Superior port city embraced as well.<sup>11</sup>

**DULUTH'S NAACP CHAPTER**

Frustrated by prevalent discrimination, and in immediate response to the black circus workers' lynching, in late June 1920 nearly 60 of Duluth's African American residents formed a branch of the NAACP, eventually joined by an equal number of sympathetic whites. Among those spearheading the effort was George B. Kelley, a Spanish-American War veteran, a captain in the Minnesota Home Guard, and a founding member of the Minneapolis NAACP. The process was divisive, however, because the branch was formed at a meeting of the Civic League, a preexisting black organization that then broke apart. Some members opposed Kelley's role and his subsequent election as president as well, because he was "a keeper of a 'dive' of low repute," a place called the Gary Canteen that served liquor and operated craps and

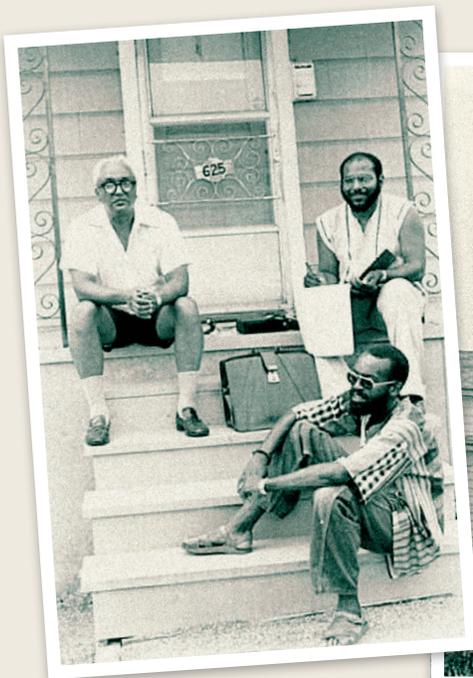
*Duluth's tony Flame Night Club employed some 60 African American men and women, but they could not dine there.*



poker tables. Yet after Minneapolis branch president (and fellow Home Guard battalion member) Charles Sumner Smith visited Duluth in July, he wrote to NAACP executive secretary James Weldon Johnson to explain that the initiative had been “a success in every way.” He also described Kelley as a “leading representative of our people for several years,” one “recognized by the best white citizens.”<sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately, over the next few decades, through the Great Depression and World War II, the Duluth NAACP was unable to affect the local color line in any meaningful way. By the 1950s, branch membership was declining, the proportion of African American members was dropping, and the national office was threatening to revoke Duluth’s NAACP charter. Intent on reviving the local group and giving it some weight was William (Bill) Maupins, who

BELOW: William F. Maupins (left), president of the Duluth NAACP in the late 1950s and 1960s, with Musa Forster (upper right) and Seitu Jones (lower right), ca. 1975. RIGHT: Maupins’ residence, 625 Ninth Avenue East, Duluth.



replaced black steelworker Lee Wiley as president in 1958. Born in Duluth in 1922, Maupins was abandoned by his mother at age four and raised by adoptive parents, William F. Maupins and Cornelia (Williams) Maupins, both of whom were originally from the Deep South. After graduating from Duluth Central High School, Maupins served in the navy and, later, graduated from the University of Minnesota Duluth (UMD) with a political science degree. When Maupins attempted to get an office job at the steel mill, however, he was told he could only be hired for work in the yards. Subsequently, he found employment as a science lab supervisor at UMD and married. By the time he took over from Wiley, though, he was a widower, raising four children

*“There is no realtor in Duluth who will even show a house in an improved area to a negro. Their refusal is uniform.”*

on his own, and living in the East Hillside area.<sup>13</sup>

Maupins began his tenure by collecting reliable statistics about job discrimination in Duluth, establishing that most of the best-paying union jobs were, in fact, closed to blacks. In February of 1960, state Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) assistant director Richard Fox came to the city to talk with various personnel directors and confirmed for the NAACP leader that among American Steel & Wire, Universal Atlas Cement, Diamond Tool & Horseshoe Company, and the Inter Lake Iron Corporation, only the steel company hired African Americans. Moreover, all of those were members of United Steelworkers Local 1028 and none were in the clerical workers union



because (as Maupins had discovered personally) blacks were excluded from office positions. Later the next year, FEPC executive director Wilfred Leland visited Duluth too, and he and Maupins met with Seafarer's International Union local representative Peter Drews. The latter explained that "the union has never had a Negro applicant for membership from the Duluth area or a Negro union member applying for assignment to a ship through the Duluth hiring hall," although there were dozens of African Americans who lived in the city and worked out of Two Harbors.<sup>14</sup>

While building momentum to address black exclusion from certain jobs in Duluth, Maupins also got the NAACP branch more involved in the statewide effort to pass a law against housing discrimination. That campaign had gained traction in the late 1950s, when two urban renewal projects and a highway expansion project in St. Paul displaced thousands of African Americans. Unlike the displaced white residents, they then struggled to find new homes or apartments outside of the city's non-white neighborhoods. But Maupins knew the problem was not limited to the Twin Cities. "There is no realtor in Duluth who will even show a house in an improved area to a negro," he wrote to state legislator Arne C. Wanvick. "Their refusal is uniform." After the legislature finally passed a fair housing law, to take effect in 1962, Maupins also began an effort to get the Duluth city council to enact a complementary municipal fair housing ordinance, which he and other members of the local FEPC believed would facilitate implementation of the state legislation. At the same time, he made himself available to Matt and Helen Carter, whose personal struggle to buy a house made the need for a city law even more evident.<sup>15</sup>



*Helen Carter found employment as a special education teacher at Jefferson School. Her employment there was cited as progress in a 1961 report to the Duluth city council.*

## LONDON ROAD

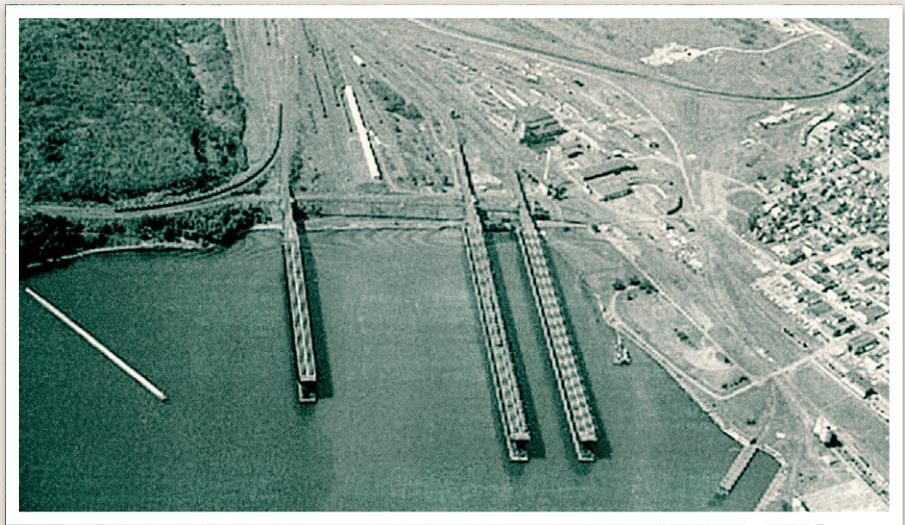
The apartment Matt Carter found for his family in the summer of 1960 was at 314 North Fourth Avenue West, in the Central Hillside area, one of several managed by the wife of a white boat engineer he knew. This was a section of town where other black families lived, and the woman rented the property only to African Americans and American Indians. Like the seafarer's union, however, the Lake Carriers Association, the union for lake boat workers, at least implicitly refused to allow blacks to join crews in Duluth, so Carter shipped out of Two Harbors, 30 miles up the shore to the northeast. Likewise, when Helen went to apply for a teaching position she was initially told that the school system had no "colored" teachers. Fortunately, while sitting dejected in the board of education offices, she was befriended by Richard Weatherman, a special education professional who hired her to teach "exceptional children" at Jefferson School. This was "progress" that Maupins and other members of the FEPC cited in their 1961 report to the city council, one advance among others for "profes-

sional persons from minority groups," including a "Negro caseworker" hired by the county welfare board and the temporary employment of another "Negro" by the university. Subsequently, over the next few years Weatherman also worked with Helen to recruit more black teachers, two from Chicago and one from Boston.<sup>16</sup>

Within a year after coming to Duluth, the Carters moved to 215 West Fifth Street, just two blocks away, but as Tony became a teenager and daughter Kai was born, they realized they needed more space and started looking for another apartment beyond Central Hillside. Carter experienced a range of responses, though all of them refusals. He would see a "for rent" sign and people in a front room watching television, but when he knocked on the door they would look out and notice that he was black and refuse to answer. Or, if they did come to the door, they would claim that the place was already rented and, in a few cases, they would say very explicitly they would not rent to him and slam the door in his face. Carter also tried working with a realtor to buy a house, yet the realtor made it clear that everything for sale of any

quality was off-limits to African Americans. "I could show you the place," he would say, "but you can't live there." Otherwise, the realtor directed him to the Gary area, where other blacks already owned homes. After enough of this, the Carters decided to buy a lot and build their own house. They planned to do this somewhere in Duluth's eastern outskirts, not too far from the school where Helen taught and nearer to Two Harbors, where the boat Matt worked on was docked. The problem, as they well knew, was that the area was solidly white.<sup>17</sup>

The particular lot the Carters liked was on a stretch of lakeshore at Forty-Fifth Avenue East and London Road, property owned by Edmond (Ed) H. Hebert, who lived nearby at 4623 London Road. When Carter made an offer on the lot, however, and Hebert realized that the family was black, he refused to sell. This sent Carter to the office of county attorney Keith Brownell, who said he sympathized but claimed there was little he could do. Instead, he recommended that the Carters work with Rev. Thomas L. Smith, a white minister at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation and a fiery advocate for racial equality who had come to Duluth a few years earlier, in 1957. The best way to do that, Brownell said, was to approach a local white attorney, Andrew Larson. Carter tracked down Larson, who talked to Smith, and the latter readily agreed to be a straw purchaser. The minister completed the transaction with Hebert in March 1962, buying the lot from him for \$1,300—\$450 less than what he originally had paid for it. At this point, Maupins also got involved, correctly assuming that the matter was not settled, and he became a frequent guest for dinner at the Carters' apartment, providing a steady measure of encouragement and advice.<sup>18</sup>



Aerial view of the docks at Two Harbors, 1970. The boat Matt worked on docked here. The new house the Carters wanted to build on London Road was 23 miles away, about five miles closer than their previous residence in central Duluth.

## SETBACK

Attempting to be prudent in the property transfer to the Carters, Smith let several months pass before they made their exchange and Matt waited before beginning the process of getting a building permit. In mid-February 1963, however, during National Brotherhood Week, a member of Matt's Sacred Heart Church Bible study group was on the radio discussing discrimination in Duluth. He revealed that he knew of a black couple who had to have a minister purchase a lot in an all-white neighborhood for them. Some London Road residents put two and two together and confronted Smith, telling him they "didn't want the neighborhood ruined." Carter decided to file for a permit then, including a request to modify the standard setback from 25 to 15 feet, so he could build a two-car garage. In March, neighbors responded with a petition to the city planning commission, signed by more than 50 residents, opposing the request, claiming that a lesser setback on the corner lot would create a traffic haz-

ard and that "alteration of existing building lines" would "detract from the property values of existing homes in the area."<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, in early January Maupins had written to Viola May Kanitz at the newly formed State Commission Against Discrimination to ask about how to use the recently passed fair housing law. She replied at length, explaining the procedure for aggrieved parties to make a complaint. Shortly after residents petitioned the planning commission, Minnesota-Dakota NAACP State Conference president Donald Lewis advised the local leader to have the Carters do this and be the law's first test case. Emboldened, Maupins showed the London Road petition at the next NAACP branch meeting, which was packed, and several days later he joined others at the next planning commission meeting, which was also full and unusually heated. At one point, Smith boldly called out the white residents on the question. "The issue is not the setback of the house," he said, "it is the man's race," noting that the city regularly made exceptions to setbacks in similar

situations. In a subsequent meeting and letter to the commission, NAACP lawyer Newton S. Friedman was less blunt but made the same point. The Carters faced discrimination when they tried to buy the lot for their home, and “bias” was evident among opponents at the public hearings, Friedman explained, suggesting that the decision to vacate the setback was not about traffic safety or property values and should not be decided by those criteria. Ultimately, though, the commission decided against the exemption and required a redesigned building plan for a permit, one allowing only a single-car garage.<sup>20</sup>

Discouraged but determined, the Carters began construction of their home at the end of April (slowed initially by someone stealing all of the plywood for the flooring), and in early June an array of Duluth’s civil rights activists resumed their campaign to pass a local fair housing ordinance. FEPC members met in the mayor’s reception room and started the meeting with “extensive discussion” of the situation that Matt and Helen Carter had faced. Bill Maupins then reported that he had reason to think the mayor and city council would like to enact a housing law while chairman William Van Evera said he had been in communication with council member Donn Larson about introducing a bill similar to one they had drafted the year before. Another commission member, Anna Paine, announced that nearly two dozen people had formed the Duluth Citizens Human Rights Committee, to support the fair housing ordinance campaign, to set up a task force to investigate discrimination complaints, and to make contacts in neighborhoods where “minority group members” were attempting to move. Over the next couple of months there was considerable outreach and lobbying, and in early September, the city council passed the bill.<sup>21</sup>

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## VANDALISM

More at ease with their new status as homeowners, in the fall of 1963 the Carters decided to adopt another son, Bill, and the family settled into the London Road neighborhood. Three years later, however, on a mid-October night when Carter was away on a boat, vandals defaced their home and sidewalk with graffiti, including “Koons Get Out,” “Burn Baby Burn,” and “Get Out Nigger.” Police Chief Edward Bird was reportedly shocked by what happened to the “law-abiding family” and, while pledging that everything would be done to prevent another incident, he acknowledged the need for change “in the hearts of men.” “We in Duluth have believed we are free of racial problems,” he said, “but apparently some deep-rooted feelings can be found here.” The editorial board at the *Duluth Herald Tribune* similarly wrung its hands. “Now we know that we have at least one ugly mind or two in our community,” it wrote, people who want “to condemn every member of a group because of a belief that somewhere, at some time, some members of the group were not desirable neighbors.” More practically, the newly established Duluth Jewish Federation Community Relations Council offered a \$500 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of those involved, although the money was never claimed.<sup>22</sup>

Less than a year later, on August 9, 1967, vandals struck again, defacing the Carters’ house with more graffiti, including “Kill Niggers,” “Get Out

Niggers,” a swastika, and the initials “KKK,” as well as painting one of their cars with varnish remover. This time none of the family was at home. Matt was on a boat and Helen had taken the children to Washington, DC, to visit her brother, who worked for Senator Walter Mondale. In the months since the last incident, though, the Carters had decided to host a student from Uganda, Al Lwami, a freshman at UMD, and he was there. Lwami reported hearing a noise like “rushing wind” around 10 pm but did not discover the damage until the next morning. After viewing the scene, Maupins declared that blacks in Duluth were “outraged” and demanded “an all-out effort to put a cessation to this type of intimidation.” Yet the official white response was once more mostly understated and nearsighted. “I am hopeful that this is just an isolated case of vandalism,” Mayor Ben Boo said, since “it is contrary to the feelings of this community.” The *Duluth Herald Tribune* editorialized about the incident too, calling it a “blot” on the city that demanded residents search their “collective conscience,” while suggesting that it was “contrived by one or no more than a few deranged persons” and comparing it to “the recent violence of a very small percentage of Negroes in several cities.”<sup>23</sup>

Fortunately, harassment of the Carters ceased, in part because a few of their surrounding neighbors banded together to form a volunteer watch detail. In an act of generosity, local philanthropist Julia Marshall

also bought the four open lots adjacent to the Carters' and offered to sell however much of the land they wanted, bringing the couple flowers when they signed the papers to buy another 20 feet. More surprisingly, several neighbors who had initially opposed the family's presence befriended them, including Ed Hebert and his wife, Adeline. They became close enough that Matt and Helen began to invite them over on holidays. Later, when Adeline was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and moved into a nursing home in Superior, they did various things to help. Then, when Ed got sick, they found a nursing home for him as well. Ed was so thankful he told Matt he wanted to sell him his house, underpriced, although Matt passed on that because he was concerned that Ed needed money for his own health care.<sup>24</sup>

## LEGACY

By the time the Carters built their house on London Road, the black population in Duluth had begun to recover from its decline in the 1930s and 1940s, rising from 334 in 1950 to 565 in 1960. Over the course of the next decade, it doubled to 1,100, among a growing population of 108,000. Much of this increase was due to the expansion of an air force base but, as Maupins explained to his colleagues on the local FEPC, African American servicemen often had difficulty finding adequate housing, especially if they brought their families with them. At least half a dozen property owners renting to base personnel simply refused to sign a nondiscriminatory certificate and, in a 1964 study, nearly two-thirds of black servicemen said they experienced discrimination when they tried to rent an apartment. Duluth was, more or less, still geographically segregated, with black residents

*“The country now seems more ready to look its nightmare squarely in the eye.”*

concentrated in the area between the West End and East Hillside as well as in Duluth Heights, to the northwest, many of those in the low-income Harborview Homes Project. Generally, the cost of renting or buying homes was lower in these neighborhoods, and the quality of housing was typically lesser too, with more than a third of African Americans living in buildings or homes considered to be in a poor condition. This was due in part to the fact that nearly a third of blacks also lived at or below the poverty level, and nearly half had a household income less than the city median.<sup>25</sup>

Forty years later, at the turn of the century, very little had changed. Only a small fraction of African American

residents in Duluth were homeowners, compared to the large majority of whites, and the number of blacks living below the poverty level had actually increased. Matt and Helen Carter still lived in their London Road home and yet, it seemed, they were mostly an anomaly, a rare break in the city's color line that was less a preview of its imminent dissolution than a confirmation of its deep historical roots.

To be sure, some black and white residents did at least begin to reckon with the gratuitous violence that had helped to establish and preserve Duluth's racial order. On October 10, 2003, thousands gathered downtown, this time not with murderous intent,



African American "family reunion" in Duluth, 1970.

as they had 83 years before, but rather to unveil what was then one of the only memorials in the country dedicated to lynching victims. And once more, the *New York Times* took the opportunity to comment. “Americans who know of the violence of this period at all tend to believe it was confined to the segregationist South,” the editorial board explained, “but the fact that lynchings took place in many parts of the country was underscored recently in the northern Minnesota city of Duluth.” Although for a long stretch many people tried to forget the racist violence that plagued both the South and the North, they mused, “the country now seems more ready to look its nightmare squarely in the eye.”<sup>26</sup> Of course, two decades later, that statement again rings hollow, on the one hundredth anniversary of the Duluth lynchings and as protests continue in the wake of white Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin killing African American George Floyd on May 25, 2020, called by some a modern-day lynching. We can only hope that this time the country’s reckoning will be different. ▣

## Notes

1. *New York Times*, June 17, 1920. The men lynched were Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Isaac McGhie. Similarly, the *New York Globe* saw the lynching as a challenge to regional distinctions, though also suggesting that white “savagery” was not limited to the South because “Negro crime” was not either: “Duluth is not in Georgia, Mississippi, Kentucky, or even Missouri. It is in Minnesota. Yet in Duluth last night a mob of five thousand persons stormed the police station, and, capturing six Negroes, lynched three of them for their alleged attack upon a white girl. . . . The north has criticized the south bitterly for Negro lynchings. Brought in contact with Negro crime, it reaches for rope and tar barrel. The full implications of this fact have not been comprehended. They go beyond the mere indefensible savagery of the individual incident. They suggest that the Negro problem, so long the south’s problem only, is now the nation’s. . . . There is that about the Negro and the white which appar-

ently make for savagery like Duluth’s regardless of geographical situation and tradition.” *New York Globe*, June 16, 1920; this clipping along with the one cited above both in the Papers of the NAACP, Part 7: The Anti-Lynching Campaign, 1912–1955, Series A: Investigative Files, 1912–1953 (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America) (hereafter, NAACP Papers).

2. US Census Manuscripts 1920, 1930, and 1940. The campaign for an antilynching law was led by African American St. Paul resident Nellie Francis, president and founder of the Everywoman Progressive Council, president of the Minnesota State Federation of Colored Women, and wife of William T. Francis, one of the lawyers for black circus worker Max Mason. The bill was signed into law on April 18, 1921. The first newspaper report of a KKK chapter in Duluth was the *Duluth Herald*, July 1, 1922, noting that it had organized the previous summer at the Owl’s Fraternity Hall, with 700 members, and since then the membership had grown to 1,500. Among the members in 1925 and 1926 were more than two dozen police officers, including Sergeant Oscar Olson, who was in charge of the jail the night the mob broke in and took black prisoners to be lynched: Elizabeth Dorothy Hatle, *The Ku Klux Klan in Minnesota* (New York: History Press, 2013), 34–35.

3. A number of historical studies focus on racism in the Upper Midwest and Minnesota. For example, on the roots of racism, see Leslie Schwalm, *Emancipation’s Diaspora: Race and Reconstruction in the Upper Midwest* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009) and William Green, *A Peculiar Imbalance: The Fall and Rise of Racial Equality in Early Minnesota* (St. Paul: MNHS Press, 2007).

On housing segregation, see Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Stephen G. Meyer, *As Long as They Don’t Move Next Door: Segregation and Racial Conflict in American Neighborhoods* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000); David M. P. Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Richard Rothstein, *Color of Law: The Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018); James W. Loewen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005). One book that focuses on the importance of extralegal white racism in creating and protecting residential segregation in the North is Jeannine Bell, *Hate Thy Neighbor: Move-In Violence and the Persistence of Racial Segregation in American Housing* (New York: New York University Press, 2013). See also Tesa Rigel Hines, “Community Prejudice Is Also to Blame: Significant Causes and Effects of Residential Segregation in St. Louis,” *Journal of Urban History* 45, no. 3 (May 2019): 578–94.

On civil rights activism in the Upper Midwest, see Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Lib-*

*erty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008); James Ralph, *Northern Protest: Martin Luther King, Jr., Chicago, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Angela Dillard, *Faith in the City: Preaching Radical Social Change in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007); Patrick Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); and William Green, *Degrees of Freedom: The Origins of Civil Rights in Minnesota, 1865–1912* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

4. Matthew Carter, interviewed by author, Oct. 29, 2017, recording and transcript in author’s possession; US Census Manuscripts 1920, 1930, and 1940.

5. Carter interview.

6. Carter interview.

7. *Lake Meadows, Designed for Modern Living on Chicago’s New Southside Lake Front* (Chicago: New York Life Insurance Company, 1952), 1–8; “A Second Transformation Awaits Lake Meadows,” *Chicago Tribune*, Mar. 23, 1997; Carter interview.

8. Arnold R. Alanen, *Morgan Park: Duluth, US Steel, and the Forging of a Company Town* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), xiii–xiv, 21; transcript of interview with Fred Douglas Bell and Lillian Vina Bell by David Vassar Taylor, Malik Simba, and Musa Foster, July 9, 1975, 1–2, 5, Minnesota Black History Project Oral History Interviews, Manuscript Collections, MNHS (hereafter, MBHP).

9. Alanen, *Morgan Park*, 186–87; transcript of interview with Edward Nichols by David Taylor, July 17, 1974, 17, MBHP. Council No. 3 Samaritans held an annual minstrel show around Memorial Day: see *The Labor World* (Duluth), May 29, 1915, 8. Local schools also tried to put their property to use when classes were not in session, and that included minstrel shows, with at least three between 1920 and 1921: see *The Playground* 16, no. 1 (Apr. 1922). And minstrel shows continued into the 1950s, including annual productions by Trinity Lodge No. 282 at the Shrine Auditorium on East First Street, not far from where the 1920 lynching happened: see “Trinity Lodge No. 282 Minstrel Show Recordings,” Archives and Special Collections, Kathryn A. Martin Library, University of Minnesota Duluth.

10. Transcript of interview with Charles and Geraldine Stalling by Musa Foster, Malik Simba, and Seitu Jones, July 30, 1975, 23, MBHP; Herbert Hill (labor director, NAACP) to Wilfred C. Leland (executive director, Minnesota Fair Employment Practices Commission), May 17, 1961, 1, and Wilfred Leland to Herbert Hill, July 11, 1961, 1, William Maupins Papers, Archives and Special Collections, Kathryn A. Martin Library, University of Minnesota Duluth (hereafter, Maupin Papers); transcript of interview with William Maupins by Musa Foster, Malik Simba, and Seitu Jones, July 31, 1975, 10, MBHP.

On service: Nichols interview, 18. The segregation in public spaces was contrary to the civil rights law Minnesota had enacted in 1885, which

was first legally tested in Duluth a decade later. In mid-September 1897 a white man named Tom Shannon met (formerly enslaved) African American Edward Rhone on West Superior Street and invited him to have a drink at the Merchants Hotel saloon, owned by Robert Loomis. Shannon went inside but Rhone lingered at the door and the black porter warned him that he would not be served there, as indeed happened. When the state supreme court heard the case, justices ruled against Rhone on the grounds that saloons (and “the sale of intoxicating liquors” generally) were intentionally excluded from the civil rights law and because saloonkeepers were not “in public business” their right to choose whom they served could not be restricted. This decision prompted Fredrick McGhee, William Morris, and Bemidji attorney Charles Scrutchin (who would later play a role in defending the black circus workers) to push for amended legislation adding “saloons,” which was spearheaded by J. Frank Wheaton, the first African American elected to the legislature. See Paul Nelson, *Fredrick L. McGhee: A Life on the Color Line, 1861–1912* (St. Paul: MNHS Press, 2002), 58–60; *Records and Briefs in Cases Decided by the Supreme Court of Minnesota*, April Term 1898, *Edward T. Rhone v. Robert N. Loomis*.

11. Abram L. Harris, *The Negro Population in Minneapolis: A Study of Race Relations* (Minneapolis: Urban League and Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House, 1926), 12–16, 24–26.

12. Mark Robert Schneider, *“We Return Fighting”: The Civil Rights Movement in the Jazz Age* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2002), 109; *Duluth Rip-Saw*, May 19, 1917; Charles Sumner Smith to James Weldon Johnson, June 21, 1920, 2, June 29, 1920, 1, and July 22, 1920, 2, NAACP Papers. More than a few of Minnesota’s African American leaders were Spanish-American War veterans and even more were members of the all-black Sixteenth Battalion in the Minnesota Home Guard. That and other Home Guard battalions were established in April 1917 to replace the National Guard, which had been federalized during World War I: see Peter J. DeCarlo, “Loyalty within Racism: The Segregated Sixteenth Battalion of the Minnesota Home Guard During World War I,” *Minnesota History* 65, no. 6 (Summer 2017): 209–10.

13. Maupins interview, 10; William Maupins to Benjamin Sigler, Sept. 24, 1963, Maupins Papers. Without a manuscript collection specific to the local Duluth branch, it is difficult to fully trace the NAACP’s history there from its founding to the late 1950s, when the Maupins Papers pick up the story, although what is available indicates that the branch became increasingly moribund during that time.

14. Richard K. Fox, Jr., to William Maupins, May 2, 1960, 1, and Wilfred Leland to Herbert Hill (labor secretary, NAACP), July 11, 1961, 1, Maupins Papers; Maupins interview, 5.

15. On segregation in the Twin Cities, see Housing and Redevelopment Authority of the City of St. Paul, *The Proposed Selby-Dale Renewal*

*Plan: A Study of and Recommendations for Community Rehabilitation and Conservation* (Mar. 1960), 33–38, MNHS, and F. James Davis, “The Effects of a Freeway Displacement on Racial Housing Segregation in a Northern City,” *Phylon* 26 (Fall 1965): 209–15. Existing legislation, enacted in 1953, prohibited restrictive housing covenants based on race and banned racial discrimination in public housing accommodations. The 1962 measure added to this by covering rentals and property sales more broadly, although it excluded apartment buildings where one of the units was owner-occupied, rooms in an owner-occupied house, and single-family dwellings without government financing (FHA or VA mortgages). The latter exclusion meant that most real estate, which used only “conventional” financing, fell outside the law: see Louise W. McCannel, “Statement Concerning Fair Housing Legislation” and “Minnesota Has a New Housing Law,” and Folder “Legislation – undated; 1953–Feb 1959,” box 15, Records, 1946–1989, Greater Minneapolis Interfaith Fair Housing Program, Manuscript Collections, MNHS.

On the Duluth municipal ordinance: William Maupins to Rep. Arne C. Wanvick (state representative), Mar. 21, 1961; Report of the Duluth Fair Employment Practices Commission to the City Council of Duluth, June 1961, Duluth Fair Employment Practices Commission Meeting Minutes, May 15, 1962, and Duluth Fair Employment Practices Commission Minutes, Nov. 27, 1962—all Maupins Papers. The state FEPC was established in 1955, and local committees were created to support its work in the years following, including more than two dozen by the end of the decade. After 1962, with passage of the fair housing law, the FEPC became the State Commission Against Discrimination, which maintained the local groups.

16. Carter interview; Report of the Duluth Fair Employment Practices Commission to the City Council of Duluth; *Duluth Herald Tribune*, Mar. 7, 1963, in Unitarian Church, Duluth Records, Archives and Special Collections, Kathryn A. Martin Library, University of Minnesota Duluth (hereafter, Unitarian Church Records).

17. Carter interview.

18. Minutes of Public Hearings and of the Meeting of the City Planning Commission, Mar. 5, 1963, 3, Maupins Papers; Carter interview. See, for example the battle by so-called “black pioneers” Marion and Mary Taylor to integrate Morningside, a Minneapolis suburb: Chad Montrie, “‘A Bigoted, Prejudiced, Hateful Little Area’: The Making of an All-White Suburb in the Deep North,” *Journal of Urban History* 45, no. 2 (Mar. 2019): 300–320.

19. The full list of the residents who signed the petition can be found in Petition to City Planning Commission, Duluth, MN, Mar. 1, 1963, Maupins Papers.

20. Viola May Kanitz (assistant director, State Commission Against Discrimination) to William Maupins, Jan. 16, 1963; Donald Lewis (president, Minnesota-Dakota NAACP State Conference) to

William Maupins, Mar. 6, 1963; Minutes of Public Hearings and of the Meeting of the City Planning Commission, Mar. 5, 1963, 4–5; Newton S. Friedman to City Planning Commission, City of Duluth, May 29, 1963—all Maupins Papers; *Duluth Herald Tribune*, Mar. 6, 1963, and Mar. 7, 1963, Unitarian Church Papers.

21. Carter interview; Duluth Fair Employment Practices Commission, Annual Meeting Minutes, June 5, 1963, Maupins Papers.

22. *Duluth Herald Tribune*, Oct. 21, 1966, and Nov. 2, 1966, Unitarian Church Papers.

23. *Duluth Herald Tribune*, Aug. 10, 1967, and Aug. 11, 1967, Unitarian Church Papers; Carter interview.

24. *Duluth Herald Tribune*, Aug. 10, 1967, and Aug. 11, 1967, Unitarian Church Papers; Carter interview.

25. Department of Research and Planning, Community Improvement Division, *Community Renewal Program: Minority Profile, Duluth, Minnesota* (1969), 40; Duluth Fair Employment Practices Commission Meeting Minutes, May 6, 1959, Maupins Papers; “A Preliminary Analysis of Minority Group Housing and Employment in Duluth, Minnesota,” folder “Minnesota State Commission Against Discrimination: Employment, Housing Analysis (Duluth, Minnesota),” Minnesota Human Rights Department Records: 1947–2010, Manuscript Collections, MNHS.

26. *New York Times*, Dec. 5, 2003; Katie Galito and Brooks Johnson, “A Century of Shame,” *Star Tribune*, June 17, 2020, B1, B6.

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