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Race Work: The Rise of Civil Rights in the Urban West
(review)

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RACE WORK: The Rise of Civil Rights in the Urban West. By Matthew C. Whitaker. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. 2005.

Race Work examines the struggle for civil rights in a multiethnic community of the southwest, Phoenix, Arizona, where African Americans comprised only 5% of the population and Jim Crow reigned. Lincoln and Eleanor Ragsdale, middle-class professionals from Oklahoma and Pennsylvania, moved there in 1945 and devoted fifty years of their lives to civil rights advocacy and “racial uplift.” Lincoln, a veteran Tuskegee Airman and a third generation mortician, was “one of eleven Tuskegee graduates assigned to Luke Air Field in Arizona . . . as part of an experimental integrated gunnery team . . . one of several test cases that influenced President Harry S. Truman’s desegregation of the U.S. military.” (77) Eleanor was a third generation teacher.

Prosperous professionals, the Ragsdale’s bought a home in a wealthy white area off-limits to blacks. They refused to be intimidated by hostile neighbors and police, threatening phone calls, and racial graffiti painted on their home; Eleanor helped other black families integrate the area. Active in the NAACP, they funded a suit on behalf of three black children seeking to attend Phoenix Union High School, recruiting a \$500 donation from Senator Barry Goldwater. The landmark decision handed down in 1953, a year before *Brown v. Topeka*, was “the first legal opinion in the United States declaring school segregation unconstitutional” and invalidated the state’s school segregation laws (121).

Seeking jobs for blacks, Lincoln and the Rev. George B. Brooks confronted bank officials and major employers, Ragsdale making demands and threatening mass protest if blacks were not hired and Brooks quietly following up to secure agreement (142-143). They testified to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission in 1962, documenting housing and employment discrimination by corporations receiving federal funds, county and city government, and the Federal Housing Authority; the Commission found that Phoenix was one of the most segregated cities in the United States. Seeking a public accommodations law, in 1964 the Ragsdales with NAACP, CORE, and Urban League activists blockaded the Arizona Senate, refusing to let anyone in or out until the city council acted. Troops removed the protestors; however, four months later the council passed the ordinance. The millionaire Ragsdales paid heavily as loans for their hearses were called in and white insurance companies bought off their customers.

Whitaker’s thesis is: World War II veterans and black professionals migrating to the West post-1945 brought a new militance to agitation for civil rights that bore fruit and then lost momentum after the mid-1960s, as black solidarity fractured with the emergence of younger nationalists and class divisions; the movement eroded further in the 1970s and 1980s with the advent of black and white neoconservatives and without a coalition with Mexican Americans. He concludes that by the 1990s, the Ragdales’ commitment to capitalism and self-help, political agitation, and integration left them “out of step with younger, more nationalist voices” and discouraged that the desegregation they had worked for had “virtually destroyed the economic base of black communities, and . . . damaged black social and cultural networks,” a concern articulated by many movement veterans (279).

Race Work is a well written addition to the burgeoning field of civil rights community studies of cities outside the South.

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