

Almost Perfect Equality

The first African American graduates of the University of Minnesota were few in number but strong in aspiration, many joining a growing professional class of black Minnesotans at the turn of the last century. *By Tim Brady*

Gale Hilyer, pictured in the 1914 *Gopher* annual, was the son of the University's first African American graduate, Andrew Hilyer (1882).



The early history of African Americans in Minnesota has been enhanced this year by a number of projects. David Taylor (B.A. '67, Ph.D. '77), dean of General College at the University of Minnesota and one of the leading historians of African Americans in Minnesota, has published Cap Wigington: An Architectural Legacy in Ice and Stone, which tells of the life of St. Paul's first African American architect. Paul Nelson (J.D. '77) has written Frederick L. McGhee: A Life on the Color Line, 1861-1912, a biography of Minnesota's first black lawyer. In addition to these new books, Twin Cities Public Television is planning to produce a documentary history of African Americans in Minnesota.

Little has been written about the experiences of African American students at the University of Minnesota in the school's early years. Minnesota hopes to help illuminate this history with the following article, which is the first of three on African Americans at the University.



One hundred twenty years ago this past May, the University of Minnesota graduated its first African American student. Andrew Hilyer was one of only 34 graduates in the class of 1882. They and some 180 others attended college on a campus that consisted of exactly two buildings. Students rubbed elbows every day in chapel, in classes, and doing chores like stoking the furnace of Old Main. According to *Recollections of Early University Days* (1934) by Hilyer's classmate Elmer Ellsworth Adams:

"During the time that [Hilyer] was in college there was never any discrimination against him on account of his color, but he mingled with his classmates on almost perfect equality. [Hilyer] was intelligent in every way, a good scholar, [who made] quite a reputation [on campus] as an orator. . . ."

While it may be presumptuous for a white student to write that there was never any discrimination against Andrew Hilyer (sometimes spelled Hillyer), there are hints that the University of Minnesota was a more collegial place for African American students near Hilyer's time than it would be by the 1920s and '30s. The University in its early days "seems to have been open and accommodating [to African Americans]," says David Taylor. "Black people weren't assisted to any

degree because of their race. But there is ample evidence to suggest that African American students were not denied application."

Professional schools, particularly the law school, the school of pharmacy, and the school of dentistry were open to black students, and quite a few undergraduates, including women, attended and graduated from the University.

Many of these would join a small but growing professional class of black Minnesotans, most of whom lived in the Twin Cities. It was a community with some national distinctions. In St. Paul at the turn of the century, a larger percentage of African Americans owned their own homes than did in any other city in the United States. Black Minnesotans had comparatively lower rates of illiteracy than African Americans in any other region in the nation, just 3.4 percent. A thriving black press and a burgeoning number of African American community lodges, societies, leagues, and protective associations encouraged and promoted educational advancement within the community.

At the University of Minnesota, Frank Wheaton (1894), McCants Stewart (1901), William Ricks (1905), and Harvey Burk (1908) all earned law degrees. Wheaton was not only the first black graduate of law; four years later he would become the first African American legislator in the state of Minnesota when he was elected to the Minnesota House of Representatives for Minneapolis. Wheaton would ultimately move to Harlem, where he established a highly successful law practice, and became a leading figure in the emerging Harlem Renaissance.

The first African American woman to graduate from the University of Minnesota was Scottie Primus Davis of St. Paul's Central High School, who earned her bachelor's degree in 1904. Elvira Turner, who graduated in 1906, became a teacher at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Olive Howard was the first woman to achieve a professional degree from the school of pharmacy in 1914. She was the daughter of Dr. O.O. Howard, one of the earliest African American doctors to practice in the Twin Cities. Dr. Earl S. Weber, another St. Paulite and the first black graduate of St. Thomas Academy, became the first black graduate of the University's dental school in 1921.

Andrew Hilyer moved to Washington, D.C., soon after graduating and eventually earned a law degree. He worked in the U.S. Treasury Department and became a trustee of Howard University. His son, Gale Hilyer, followed his father at the University of Minnesota and earned both bachelor ('12) and law ('15) degrees from the University. Gale practiced law for many years in Minneapolis, and among other distinctions he became, in 1930, the brother-in-law of Ralph Bunche when his wife's sister married the future United Nations ambassador and Nobel Peace Prize recipient.

In 1915, when Gale Hilyer first entered private practice, he joined the law firm of Albert Hall, a man who was a classmate of his father's. It was a rare invitation for the time—an African American attorney being asked to join a white attorney's law firm—and perhaps gives added credence to the assessment of Andrew Hilyer's



Olive Howard, pictured in the 1916 *Gopher*, was the first woman to earn a professional degree from the University's school of pharmacy, in 1914. Next to her photo is the quote: "When, oh, when will these test tubes be made of wood?"

er's classmate that Hilyer "mingled with . . . almost perfect equality."

Tracking the lives and careers of African American students who attended the University of Minnesota in this era is an imprecise science, as is creating a list of "firsts" or documenting a who's who of black graduates. The University did not keep records of its students by race, and there is evidence to suggest that some students of mixed racial background passed as white. A pair of brothers, for instance, who graduated in the early 1890s—one from the U's school of dentistry, the other from its college of medicine—were listed as "mulatto" in an 1880 Minnesota census. Each would have been the first graduate of African American descent from his respective school, but their death certificates declare them both to be "Caucasian" and evidence suggests that they lived their professional lives as whites.

The most diligent keeper of statistics regarding African American higher education was the black community itself. Both the local and national African American press were intensely interested in supporting and promoting education and reported frequently on black graduates and the successes of African American students. In St. Paul, the longest-lived African American newspaper in the area, *The Appeal*, consistently noted a given year's graduates of area high schools and colleges. An article published in its pages in 1905 listed a total of seven African American graduates from the University of Minnesota up to that time. These included Andrew Hilyer, as well as Wheaton, Stewart, Davis, Ricks, and the two brothers mentioned above.

In 1910, educator and writer W.E.B. DuBois, who for many years edited *The*



The photograph of *Gopher* football star Robert "Bobby" Marshall in the 1905 *Gopher* is accompanied by a bio that begins: "This lank-limbed child of sunny Ethiopia. . ."



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Crisis, the NAACP journal of African American sociology, literature, and politics, began publishing an annual report in the magazine on black graduates of higher education. Initially these surveys were devoted to the graduates of "Negro Colleges," which had sprung up, primarily in the South, during the years of Reconstruction following the Civil War and served as the first choice of higher education for the great majority of black students across the United States.

During and after World War I, however, as African Americans began to migrate to industrial jobs in the north, increasing numbers of students began choosing northern state colleges. *The Crisis* reports reflect the change. The University of Minnesota makes its first appearance in the annual tally in 1919. By 1923, the U of M is listed as having 18 African American students. There were 26 in 1924, 30 in 1925, and 39 in 1928, including two graduates of the medical school and one graduate of the school of dentistry.

Black students at the University during its earliest days were certainly subject to racial stereotyping, some sanctioned by the academic institution itself. In the early 1910s, University anthro-

A photograph of Roy Wilkins (back row, second from right) and the Omega Psi Phi fraternity, the first black organization ever to be pictured in a *Gopher* annual, appeared in 1923, the same volume the Ku Klux Klan float was pictured.

pology professor Albert Jenks openly and loudly espoused his theories on the "racial degradation" that would inevitably follow the miscegenation of an integrated society.

Personal slurs were common too. Robert "Bobby" Marshall, who starred for the powerful Gopher football teams of 1904, '05, and '06 as an all-conference end, was described in the pages of the 1905 *Gopher* annual as a "lank-limbed child of sunny Ethiopia." Marshall was not only the first black athlete to play at the University, but probably the first black athlete in the Western Conference, the forerunner of today's Big Ten. He went on to a legendary athletic career in the Twin Cities area, playing professional baseball and football, with a brief stint as a pro motorcycle racer thrown in for good measure.

For all the crudeness of the racial perspectives of the day, however, the small numbers of African American students at the University in these early times tended to isolate racial problems. It wasn't until the black student population on campus grew through the 1920s, and became a community in its own right, that segregationist elements around the University came fully to the fore and civil rights became an issue at the U.

Five African American co-eds were refused service at the Oak Tree Restaurant on 14th Street near the campus in 1926, prompting a local black paper, *The St. Paul Echo*, to editorialize: "Racial discrimination, undoubtedly due to the larger registration of colored students this year and heretofore unheard of in any of the eating houses surrounding the campus, has definitely raised its head at the university."

It had raised its head earlier in the decade as



Roy Wilkins (back row, center) and the *Minnesota Daily* reporters appeared in the 1922 *Gopher*.

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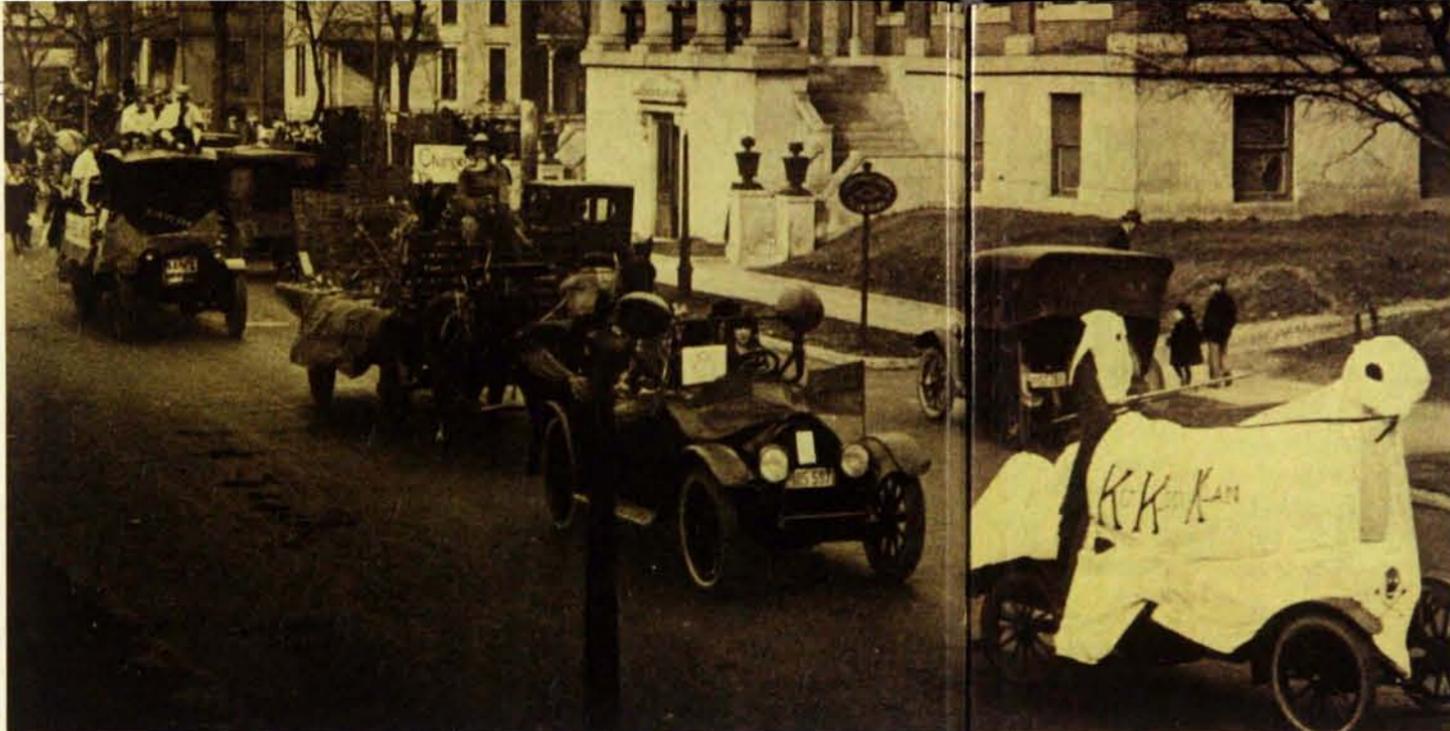
Peggy Lucas, Partner, Brighton Development Company, '63, '78, Social Work

"Serving in the Peace Corps in Iran turned my husband and me into compulsive travelers," says Peggy Lucas. "We're always planning trips to places like Morocco and China as well as road trips throughout the U.S." Peggy did both her undergraduate and graduate work at the U because it offered the courses she wanted and affordable tuition. She became a UMAA life member in 1992 and has been contributing to women's athletics ever since, giving female student-athletes the chance to go places too.

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A photograph of a Ku Klux Klan float in the homecoming parade appeared in a "Minnesota Life" pictorial in the 1923 *Gopher*. There is no mention whether the float was made by students, but an introduction calls the series of photos "composite pictures of comedy and tragedy that make up the life of a great institution. . . . a mirror of your Minnesota."

well. In 1923, The *Minnesota Daily* reported that several Big Ten campuses were said to have Ku Klux Klan organizations within their student bodies. Though the story presented no evidence that a chapter existed at the U of M, the threat was serious. "That there are existing units of the Ku Klux Klan in St. Paul and Minneapolis has been known for some time," wrote the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* in a follow-up article to the *Daily* report. "Extension of the organization to the State University was not regarded with surprise by some alumni." University President Lotus Coffman issued a statement at the time, asserting that "action will be taken to squelch the order, if reports [of its existence] are found to be true."

Neither were the classrooms of the University immune to racism. In 1921, a political science professor named Jeremiah Young purposely omitted the name of an African American student, William Morrow, when he assigned seats for his class in alphabetical order. Professor Young subsequently told Morrow that he could sit in the back of the classroom, or to the side, but not elbow-to-elbow with his fellow students.

Morrow stood up for his rights. He

asked Professor Young to poll the other students in the class to see if they minded sitting next to him. They didn't, and it was agreed that he should sit in proper alphabetical sequence. The story, which was reported in the *Minnesota Daily* the next day, also elicited an editorial from the paper entitled "Minnesota for Whom?":

Pitiful it seems that here at Minnesota—or at any other institution of learning—where we have whole departments devoted to Americanization and Sociology, to studies of American government and things allied, that anyone among us should take such an attitude [as Professor Young's]. Perhaps in the past, one or several students might have protested against being seated beside a colored student. It was then the duty of that professor to teach them that they were wrong, not to preserve the incident and apply it later.

Just a year prior to this incident at the University, three African American circus workers accused of assaulting a young white woman in Duluth were lynched by a mob—the state's most infamous moment of racial brutality. The *Daily's* progressive stance stands in stark contrast to that notorious event and suggests the volatile nature of racial relations in Minnesota during the era.

Roy Wilkins was a University sophomore when the tragedy occurred. He was a junior and had recently become the first black reporter at the *Daily* when the edi-

torial appeared. While there is no evidence he wrote the piece, Wilkins served on the campus newspaper staff for two years as a reporter and night editor.

Wilkins would go on to fame as the longtime head of the NAACP and one of the leading figures in the nation's long struggle over civil rights. At the University of Minnesota, he was an outstanding student, a winner of the prestigious Pillsbury Oratorical Contest in 1922, and a member of Omega Psi Phi fraternity, which became the first black organization ever to be pictured in a *Gopher* annual, in 1923. Wilkins remembered the photo in his memoirs and thought that he and his fraternity mates looked like a group of young, would-be lodge brothers.

Omega Psi Phi was not the only black fraternity on campus. The first, Pi Alpha Tau, came in 1911. There was also an Alpha Phi Alpha chapter. The first African American sorority on campus, Alpha Kappa Alpha, was established in 1922. In 1926, Alpha Kappa Alpha won the distinction of having the highest scholastic average of all the fraternity and sorority chapters on the University campus.

Helen Jackson of Minneapolis was a Phi Beta Kappa student in 1928. Walter Minor and John Chenault graduated from the medical college in 1930. The first black athletes since Bobby Marshall competed for the University in the late '20s. They were Art Wiesager and William O'Shields for the track team, and Ellsworth Harpole, who would become the first black Gopher

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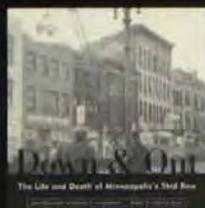
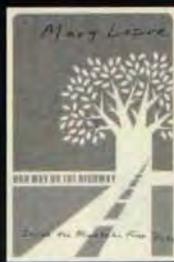
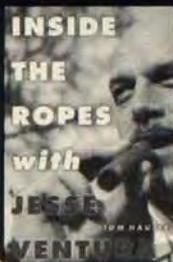
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football player since Marshall, in 1930. Vernon Wilkerson is thought to be the first African American to earn his Ph.D. at the U, in agricultural biochemistry in 1932.

But for all of the successes of individual students at the U of M, African American students, as a group and on the whole, did not share in the full life and benefits of a college education at the University. After Roy Wilkins and his fraternity brothers appeared in the 1923 *Gopher*, one can look in vain through the next dozen annuals for a photograph of an African American group, or an individual African American, among the numerous literary societies, professional groups, fraternities, sororities, and debating clubs that were such prominent features of the campus of the day.

Prospects for graduates were limited. Through most of the 1920s and '30s, there were no African Americans hired to teach in any Twin Cities public schools. Employment of black graduates at a professional level in area businesses was virtually non-existent. Talented African American students tilted toward professional schools at the University because it gave them an opportunity to earn a living within the black community, so that they didn't have to rely on the dominant white society for income.

In addition, African American student nurses at the University were not accepted for assignment at area hospitals because of the color of their skin. And black students had very few housing options, none of which involved them living in integrated housing with their white peers.

From the University of Minnesota, African American students had asked for and received little or no help in alleviating these problems. They would not be so quiet in the 1930s. ■



Helen Natalie Jackson, pictured in the 1928 *Gopher*, was a Phi Beta Kappa student that year. Among other activities, she was on the University's Bi-Racial Commission.

Tim Brady is a St. Paul-based freelance writer. The second in a series of three articles is slated for the November–December issue of Minnesota.