

REFLECTING ON OUR HISTORY

A History of Systemic Racism at the University of Minnesota School of Nursing

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A history of discrimination against racial and religious minorities at the University of Minnesota, maintained by powerful administrators who were subsequently honored with named buildings, was reflected in acts and patterns of racism in admissions and housing, within the School of Nursing. This article recounts well-documented examples of racial bias, particularly the story of Frances Mchie Rains, the first nurse of color to graduate from the University of Minnesota School of Nursing and a pioneer in overcoming racial barriers.

Keywords: racism in nursing education; nurses of color; Frances Mchie; renaming

In 1909, Professor of Medicine Richard Olding Beard founded the University of Minnesota School for Nurses (renamed the School of Nursing in 1920), which proudly holds the distinction of being the first continuously operating nursing school in an institution of higher learning. Beard was a visionary about how the values of nursing could improve society. A prolific writer, he envisioned nursing as not only having the ability to advance social justice, but also being uniquely capable of improving the health of society. His visions were magnificent, laying a foundation of values that informed the trajectory of the school throughout the decades (Manthey, 2008).

In all the glory of his visions, however, he never once wrote about the culture of racism in nursing—not as it existed by policy within the administration of the University of Minnesota nor throughout the state. The fact is that racism was then, and still is, deeply entrenched in American culture. It is alive in individual attitudes and acts of racism, and it is alive in the form of insidiously racist policies. As nursing evolved in the early 20th century, the reality of racism became apparent as a major issue—both because of individual racism and racist policies. Race-based discriminatory policies were extensive within the nursing profession. In southern states during the first half of the 20th century, nurses of color were categorically denied admission to any nursing program, while in the northern states a small number of hospitals had racial quotas that allowed *some* Black women into nursing (Hine, 1982).

In Minnesota, an anti-discrimination law known as the Equal Accommodations Act had been adopted by the Minnesota legislature in 1885, guaranteeing equal public accommodations to “all citizens of every race and color, regardless of any previous condition of servitude” (University of Minnesota, 2019, p. 14). However, at the University of Minnesota School of Nursing in 1925, postgraduate nursing student Dorothy Waters was barred from completing her residency on the basis of race. University President Lotus Delta Coffman and Dean Elias Lyon of the Medical School claimed that this did not constitute discrimination on the part of the University but rather that the hospital to which she was assigned would not allow Black nurses to serve White patients (University of Minnesota, 2019, p. 20).

FRANCES MCHIE RAINES, A PIONEER IN OVERCOMING BARRIERS

In 1929, Frances Mary Mchie (various sources spell her last name as Mchie or McHie), an African American woman from Minneapolis, applied for admission to the University of Minnesota School of Nursing. Her application was denied.

The rejection letter [from President Coffman] explained that because the University had no ties to hospitals that had “colored wards, ... we are unable to provide the

necessary clinical experience.” Asserting that a Black student would not be permitted to care for white patients, the director of the school [Marion L. Vannier] offered to recommend Mchie to a hospital that served African Americans in Chicago. (University of Minnesota, 2019, p. 20)

Unwilling to accept this decision, Mchie turned for help to W. Gertrude Brown, a well-connected local Black woman activist and the director of the Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House (now the Phyllis Wheatley Community Center) on the north side of Minneapolis. Brown’s colleague, Democratic state legislator Sylvanus A. Stockwell, invited her to describe the University of Minnesota’s rejection of Frances Mchie to the assembly of legislators. When 18-year-old Frances read them the rejection letter (Ward, 2012), “the impact was like a firecracker’... lawmakers voted overwhelmingly to direct the Board of Regents to admit her immediately to the School of Nursing” (University of Minnesota, 2019, p. 20).

Mchie’s rejection was not the only, nor even the first, instance of systemic discrimination throughout the University of Minnesota. Examples abound in areas of sports and virtually all dormitory accommodations. President Coffman, in a 1931 letter to the president of the Minneapolis branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) regarding a Black student denied dormitory housing, wrote, “No colored student has applied before for admission to the University dormitories. The good sense and sound judgment of the colored students and their parents with regard to this matter has been a source of constant gratification” (in Foy Larson, 2018). This factored into Mchie’s rejection as well; although she became the first Black person admitted to the School of Nursing, she was still prohibited from living with other student nurses. For Mchie, it meant living in the Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House, several miles from campus, throughout her education. “The segregation of student housing forced African Americans to either live at home or in a designated settlement house far from campus. This unofficial housing policy lasted from 1931 to 1937 and was reversed by President Guy Stanton Ford when he took office in 1938; the next president, Walter Coffey, would bring segregation back” (Foy Larsen, 2018).

Mchie graduated at the top of her class in 1932, having also earned a bachelor’s degree from the College of Education (McHie Family Collection, n.d.). Her experience of housing discrimination at the University of Minnesota was certainly not the last time she

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faced racial discrimination in her long and successful life. In fact, her Minnesota experience was a prelude to a lifetime of being oppressed by, and eventually breaking, color barriers. After becoming the first African American student to graduate from the University of Minnesota School of Nursing, she became the first Black nursing supervisor at the Minneapolis General Hospital. She was the first Black person to work with the Visiting Nurses Association in New Orleans, Louisiana, and one of the first Black people to teach at the University of Southern California General Hospital in Los Angeles (now the University of Southern California Medical Center). An educator and leader, Mchie served as Associate Professor and assistant to the Director of the School of Nursing at Tuskegee Institute and Nashville’s Meharry Medical College. She was also Director of Nursing for Hubbard Hospital (now Nashville General Hospital, the principal teaching hospital for Meharry’s clinical training). While at Meharry, Mchie met and married Dr. Horace Rains, an African American surgeon. Dr. Rains served in the military during World War II, spending much of his tour of duty in Europe. In 1951, they married, moved to California, and had two children (McHie Family Collection, n.d.; University of Minnesota, 2007).

The couple settled in Long Beach, where Dr. Rains started a private medical practice, with Frances assisting him at the office. Racism continued to rear its ugly head, but the family refused to back down when people tried to prevent them from living, working, visiting, and shopping in the unofficially “White only” areas of a city that was supposedly free of Jim Crow-era race restrictions. They suffered the slashed tires and other negative actions so common when a housing color barrier is broken. In her obituary, Frances was quoted as having said, “Sure it was scary. But we were tired of it all. We decided that it was time for us to stand up and be counted” (Frances McHie Rains, 2006). Later in life she even owned a Century 21 Real Estate franchise in Long Beach!

Frances also brought her leadership skills to community service in Long Beach. She organized the Long Beach National Council of Negro Women, and served as an officer in the Long Beach Branch of the NAACP.

She also served as chair of the Board of Directors of Long Beach Community Improvement League, board member of the Long Beach Children's Psychiatric Clinic, and a member of the American Nurses Association, the Harbor Area Chapter of Links, and the National Council of Negro Women. She was a member of Grant AME church for nearly 50 years, where she also taught Sunday school. In her later years, she was chair of the Board of Directors of the Long Beach Community Improvement League. Frances Mchie Rains died in 2006 at the age of 95. A friend said of her, quoted in her obituary, "She could make you laugh and cry at the same time" (Frances McHie Rains, 2006).

A CAMPUS DIVIDED

I would love to report that the discrimination experienced by Frances Mchie in 1929 marked the end of racism at the University of Minnesota; unfortunately, that is not the case. The breadth and depth of racial discrimination remained entangled in top administrative policy and practices for many years afterward. In 2017, a campus history display, *A Campus Divided: Progressives, Anticommunists, Racism and Antisemitism at the University of Minnesota 1930-1942* (<http://acampusdivided.umn.edu>), helped inspire an initiative to rename four historic, iconic campus buildings named for University officials. "The former administrators, all dead now, were in leadership posts during the 1920s through the 1960s. Their actions ranged from barring non-white students from U housing to spying on students who had opposing political views or were Jewish" (Nelson, 2019). The buildings include Coffman Memorial Union, named for previously discussed Lotus Delta Coffman, an outspoken supporter of eugenics as "the great hope for the [white] race" and of enforced segregation in student housing (Steinberg, 2019), and a dormitory named for William T. Middlebrook, a University comptroller who was also associated with racial inequities at the School of Nursing.

In 1933, African American student Ahwna Fiti was admitted to the School of Nursing and housed in the newly built Nurses Hall (later Powell Hall), where female nursing students were required to live. Comptroller Middlebrook recommended, over the objection of Dean Lyon but in line with efforts of Dean of Women Anne Dudley Blitz to keep Black students out of University housing, that Fiti be excluded from the Nurses Hall because her presence would "create a precedent which might be embarrassing to us at Pioneer Hall and Sanford Hall," two dormitories that were included in "a general University policy relative

to the housing of colored students" (University of Minnesota, 2019, p. 66). Middlebrook said of the housing policy,

The present University policy does not encourage prejudice but itself avoids those very situations from which prejudice arises... We are of the opinion, based upon our own collective experiences, that an attempt to house and feed Negro students and white students in common dormitories and dining halls would result not in good will but in an enhancement of racial prejudice. (University of Minnesota, 2019, p. 68)

In 2018, University President Eric Kaler and Executive Vice President and Provost Karen Hanson established a Task Force on Building Names and Institutional History to study the implications of renaming. The authors of the study recommended renaming all four buildings; the Board of Regents is in the process of addressing those recommendations (<https://regents.umn.edu/sites/regents.umn.edu/files/2020-02/docket-gov-feb2020.pdf>). The University of Minnesota School of Nursing has appointed Barbara Peterson, PhD, RN, CNS, as Director of Diversity, Inclusivity and Equity (<https://www.nursing.umn.edu/about/diversity>). At an All-School Meeting on September 23, 2019, Dean Connie Delaney issued a public apology from the School of Nursing to the Mchie family, who were in attendance. The School of Nursing fully supports the newly established Francis McHie Scholarship for Nurses of Color (<https://aaregistry.org/the-frances-mchie-nursing-scholarship/>).

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Disclosure. The author(s) have no relevant financial interest or affiliations with any commercial interests related to the subjects discussed within this article.

Funding. The author(s) received no specific grant or financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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