

Texas State Historical Association (TSHA)

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF COLORED PEOPLE

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By organizing and financing landmark civil-rights lawsuits, the NAACP in Texas became an important component of the national organization. The state's African Americans, who included a significant number of well-educated, urban professionals, had the financial resources and organizational talent to press for racial equality through litigation. As part of a national trend, Texas NAACP memberships increased dramatically during the World War I era. The state's first chapter, which had been established in El Paso in 1915, was joined by four new branches in 1918. In December of that year national board member Mary B. Talbert toured the state promoting Liberty Loans and organized NAACP branches in nine cities. With 7,046 members and thirty-one branches, Texas became the association's leading state in these categories. A series of events in 1919, however, revealed the racial hostility that the organization faced. In July a Longview mob burned black homes and businesses and beat a teacher, precipitating a sense of alarm among both blacks and whites (see LONGVIEW RACE RIOT OF 1919). Soon afterward the state attorney general subpoenaed the Austin branch's records to scrutinize its right to conduct business in Texas. When NAACP national secretary John Shillady learned of the impending challenge, he traveled to Austin to meet with state officials. He soon found himself an unwelcome visitor and, after receiving verbal abuse, was beaten by a gang composed in part of local officials. Governor William P. Hobby blamed Shillady and recommended that the organization stay out of Texas. The atmosphere of intimidation grew worse in the 1920s with the revival of the Ku Klux Klan. Many of the state's branches discontinued operations. Only five remained active by 1923. The Beaumont branch thought it best to disband temporarily "on account of the high race feelings in this part of the state." In Galveston the organization's leaders seemed unwilling to pursue association programs that might displease whites. An NAACP member in Dallas reported that the branch president and officers seemed

"afraid to death" to hold a meeting because of the Klan. When branches were unwilling to meet, however, the New York office encouraged them to raise funds quietly for activities elsewhere.

These cycles of activism and dormancy continued through the organization's first twenty-five years. A modest resurgence in the late 1920s gave way to another decline during the Great Depression. The branches did not revive again until the late 1930s. Typically, new leaders would wrest control of stagnant branches, and brief flurries of activity and membership drives would follow, but ultimately the chapters would lapse into inactivity. Six or seven years might pass before the New York headquarters again heard from a "revitalized" branch. Letters urging the local branches to rally went unanswered. Requests for investigations of reported racial discrimination or violence failed to generate responses. National field secretaries might rally the branches briefly while touring the state, but the units would soon fade out again. Some branches did flourish for a time. El Paso, which the national office regarded as "so thoroughly cooperative and so immediately responsive," mounted a sustained assault on the White Primary. With more than a thousand members, the San Antonio branch thrived under the leadership of J. A. Grumbles but became dormant after his death. Houston, Fort Worth, Galveston, Yoakum, and Beaumont were active at various times. The overall pattern, however, was one of a few individual branches rousing themselves temporarily only to retire again. Only after the formation of the Texas State Conference of Branches in 1937 was the NAACP able to mount a sustained, statewide movement. Under the leadership of A. Maceo Smith of Dallas, the State Conference expanded dramatically during World War II and the immediate postwar years to become the second-largest in the nation by 1945. Its total membership in more than a hundred branches averaged almost 30,000 until 1949.

Several factors contributed to the NAACP's phenomenal growth. Improved economic conditions with almost full employment meant that more blacks could afford to contribute to such causes. The war itself generated a spirit of awareness and militancy among African Americans: if they were obliged to battle totalitarianism abroad, they also saw a duty to fight racism at home. A successful assault on the Democratic white primary elections in the Supreme Court case *Smith v. Allwright* also gave the NAACP momentum. Not only did the suit give the organization an issue with which to rally Texas blacks, but the victory provided ample proof of the NAACP's effectiveness. The State Conference followed the white primary litigation with a systematic attack on segregated public education. After a successful four-year battle to secure Heman M. Sweatt's admission to the University of Texas law school, additional lawsuits were filed to desegregate undergraduate, secondary, and elementary education. Although victories at the college level came swiftly, the association met strong resistance at the lower levels. Mobs prevented the desegregation of Mansfield High School and elsewhere (see MANSFIELD SCHOOL DESEGREGATION INCIDENT), while other public school desegregation cases were tied up in the courts for years.

Like other Southern states, Texas retaliated against the NAACP. In September 1956 the attorney general seized the association's records and filed a lawsuit in Tyler to ban the organization from doing business in Texas. The charges were failing to pay the franchise tax and inciting lawsuits under the principle of barratry. The seizure of NAACP files by armed state troopers, a lengthy court proceeding, and a subsequent injunction against operations intimidated the organization so much that it became almost dormant. The Texas legislature followed suit with a rash of anti-NAACP bills. Since the 1960s the NAACP has pressed for the implementation and extension of that decade's civil-rights legislation and subsequent court decisions. Texas branches have been frequent litigants in school desegregation and legislative redistricting cases. NAACP lawyers have also targeted discriminatory practices in employment, housing, and the criminal justice system. The State Conference of Branches has estimated

its average membership level in recent years at 19,000. In 1995 the state president was Austin attorney Gary Bledsoe

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