

ISU held racially segregated spring dances in the 1930s and '40s

The racial climate throughout the United States deteriorated steadily in the first quarter of the 20th century. During this period, Jim Crow practices—both written and unwritten—were adopted across the North in communities such as Bloomington-Normal.

By the 1920s, African Americans were not welcome in most downtown Bloomington restaurants and hotels, and theaters had separate seating areas for blacks and whites. So in addition to longstanding discrimination in employment and housing, African Americans now faced the humiliations and degradations of separate and grossly unequal public facilities, such as the racially segregated beaches at Miller Park

It was in the 1920s that the first spring dance for African-American students was held on the Illinois State Normal University (as ISU was known at the time) campus. From available evidence, it appears that starting around 1930, the “Negro spring prom” became an annual event, one which lasted through the mid-1940s and World War II.

“This unfortunate campus activity,” recalled longtime (1927-1963) ISU sociology professor John A. Kinneman, “developed in the early thirties because some socially alert Negro students appeared at a dance sponsored by the sophomore class.” Herman H. Schroeder, acting ISNU president at the time (1930), “instructed the class officers to ask the Negro students to leave ... The specious excuse was offered that the Negro students had not gone through the receiving line, and, therefore, were not eligible for admission.”

“Apparently, they complied,” Kinneman said of the black students, “and, subsequently, asked for ‘equal time,’ in the form of a grant from the student activity fund. With this source of financial support, they conducted an annual dance for a goodly number of years.” This and other candid stories of ISNU come from Kinneman’s unpublished memoir, “It Occurs to Me: Incidents of Academic Experience,” held at the Dr. Jo Ann Rayfield Archives at Illinois State University.

Black students at ISNU “are not permitted to attend the regular school functions of the school but are permitted to have a dance for all the Negro students each spring,” noted Edelbert G. Rodgers, in his 1932 essay, “The Social and Economic Progress of Negroes in Bloomington and Normal.” Rodgers, who was African-American, attended Illinois Wesleyan University at the time.

Despite the cloud of injustice hanging over the black prom, it was, by all accounts, a well-attended and delightful affair.

The 1934 semi-formal dance, held May 19, featured Victor recording artist Eddie Johnson of St. Louis and his band (presumably the Cracker Jacks). Staged at McCormick Gymnasium on the ISNU campus, 175 couples danced nearly to the midnight hour. The university integrated in its early years, though the number of African-American students remained small until the postwar enrollment boom. As such, invitations were extended to local black high school students and residents, black alumni, and black students from others colleges and universities.

And as was typical of these dances, African-American students were joined by some—but certainly not all—ISNU faculty members. Those attending the 1934 black prom 85 years ago included President Raymond W. Fairchild and his wife Nellie; Dean O. Lillian Barton; athletic coach and physical education instructor Joseph Cogdal and his wife Ann; John Kinneman and his spouse Marion; and others. The ISNU faculty was all-white until the 1960s, so the dance was, in its peculiar way, both segregated and integrated.

“You probably want to ask the question, ‘What did you do for recreation?’” remarked Edelbert Rodgers during an oral history given some 50 years after he attended IWU back in the 1930s. “Well, Illinois Normal did a little bit better. They had a spring dance ever year for the Colored. They talk about Lillian Barton—she was the Dean of Women. A very delightful lady, but they say that what she used to do when they [African-American female students] would bring their dates in there, she’d get right close to them to find out who had been drinking.”

“Illinois Normal ... was very fair towards its athletes. They had one man—I shall never forget—his name was Joe Cogdal,” added Rodgers in his oral history. “And Joe Cogdal was interested to see that his Colored boys had a decent place to stay when they went places. Joe Cogdal was the kind of guy that went to the spring dance. Brought his wife and danced.” Although Rodgers didn’t mention it, Joe and Ann Cogdal were said to be superb ballroom dancers!

The black prom continued through World War II, with invitations going out to African-Americans servicemen stationed at nearby Chanute Field in Rantoul. Providing the music for the Apr. 28, 1945 dance was Howard “Toby” Davidson and his orchestra. Although bands at previous spring black proms were African-American, Davidson, a local saxophonist and bandleader, was white. “The theme of the dance is ‘heavenly paradise,’” noted *The Pantagraph*. “Dry ice smoke will add the finishing touch to a ‘heavenly’ atmosphere. A false ceiling will be made of blue and white streamers.”

At the end of World War II, John Kinneman, the ISNU sociology professor, served as faculty sponsor for the racially mixed Inter-Cultural Club. Organized in 1945, members sought to promote diversity through education and equality through action. With regards to the latter, the

club “attempted to secure equal services, especially in restaurants, for all students on the campus,” while also “developing a favorable climate for integrating housing facilities, both off and on campus.”

Black veterans returning stateside in 1945-46 struggled to accept life as second second-class citizens after fighting overseas for the all-American, flag-waving principles of liberty and justice for all. “This was in the period immediately following the Second World War, after mature and thoughtful veterans had witnessed the behavior of Negroes under arms.” noted Kinneman in his memoir.

It is at this time that the black prom was discontinued, as the very idea of a racially segregated dance became untenable to many students, faculty and area residents coming to recognize the enormous gulf between the nation’s cherished ideals and its real-world racism.

In the fall of 1947, a group of black and white students began picketing the Pilgrim restaurant, which refused to serve black students (the building is still standing, occupied today by Alamo II.) Kinneman credited Raymond Fairchild, who served as ISNU president from 1933 to 1955, for helping to ensure that the Pilgrim integrated without further incident in December 1947.

Kinneman, though, does fault Fairchild for not breaking the faculty color line, as the university president had the chance to hire an African-American ISNU graduate who went on to earn a PhD in elementary education from the University of Chicago.

According to Kinneman, the university would’ve employed this eminently qualified individual had he come from a male-dominated academic field such as industrial arts. But the predominance of women as education majors and the idea of a black male professor were evidently too much to overcome.

Regardless, it was a sorely missed opportunity for the university. Not until 1966—that’s 101 years after the end of the Civil War—did ISU hire its first tenure-track African-American faculty members.