"Shooting Down Racism" *Lincoln and Eleanor Ragsdale and Residential Desegregation in Phoenix, 1947-1953*

Matthew C. Whitaker

"I want to congratulate you for doing your bit to make the world safe for democracy and unsafe for hypocrisy."[1] — A. Philip Randolph

BETWEEN 1947 and 1954, Dr. Lincoln Johnson Ragsdale and Eleanor Dickey Ragsdale helped destroy residential segregation in Phoenix, Arizona, presently the fifth largest city in the United States. In desegregating the previously all-white Encanto-Palm Croft residential neighborhood in the city during the summer of 1953, they helped stimulate a black Phoenician freedom movement that desegregated Phoenix public schools in 1953, one year before the *Brown v. The Topeka Board of Education* in 1954, and some of the state's largest corporations, such as Bank One of Arizona and Motorola as early as 1962. The Ragsdales were not alone. Local community groups, a number of them interracial, played key roles in desegregating the "Valley of the Sun." The Ragsdales, however, with creativity and a passion for racial equality, helped spark the Civil Rights Movement in Phoenix and lead it during its most potent period. They were devoted to diversity and racial justice, and they displayed a extraordinary ability to anchor and manipulate a cornucopia of protest networks during the city's black freedom struggle. Although they were set apart from the Civil Rights Movement in the American South geographically, they were very aware of the exigencies of white supremacy and African American insurgency. They were moved to fight after enduring discrimination for years, and internalizing World War II's promise of freedom and democracy. They were supported by a growing black Phoenician population, and a budding postwar white western liberal establishment. Their efforts to aid the African American community in Phoenix and the cause of freedom during the post-war years, placed them among the most influential leaders in American Western history. Their leadership helped tear down the rigid walls of residential segregation in Phoenix, and helped transformed the city into a more inclusive and tolerant city.[2]

Lincoln Ragsdale was born on July 27, 1926 in Ardmore, Oklahoma, and was reared among a family of morticians who owned several mortuaries throughout Oklahoma. After completing high school in Ardmore in 1944, Lincoln joined the Air Force and was relocated to Tuskegee, Alabama, where he became a cadet at the celebrated Tuskegee Flying School. Tuskegee, a racially segregated institution, trained almost one thousand African American pilots for missions in Europe during World War II. After completing his training at Tuskegee, Ragsdale was stationed at Luke Air Force Base in Litchfield Park, Arizona. He was the first African American pilot to serve at the installation. Eleanor Dickey Ragsdale was born in Collingdale, Pennsylvania on February 23, 1926. She finished grade school in Collingdale, but completed high school in Darby, Pennsylvania in 1943. Ragsdale then enrolled in the historically black college, Cheyney University of Pennsylvania. The university's main mission was to cultivate African American teachers, who would become leaders in their local communities. Eleanor graduated from Cheyney in 1947, and not long after her that she migrated to Phoenix to being a career as a Kindergarten teacher at Dunbar Elementary School.[3]

Lincoln and Eleanor Ragsdale migrated to Phoenix during a critical period in African American history. Between 1947 and 1953, black people changed the ways in which Americans viewed race and democracy. Discrimination and racial violence, housing, limited educational opportunities, unemployment, and health care, continued to be complicated and dispiriting issues for blacks. African Americans, however, adopted more direct and militant strategies to address them. As the United States emerged from World War II victorious, blacks seized this opportunity to demand full inclusion in American society. African Americans were critical of the United States' fight for democracy overseas while blacks lived in an apartheid-*like* system home. During the war, black soldiers such as Lincoln Ragsdale fought fascism in Europe and white supremacy at home, both in the military and private life. They christened these corresponding campaigns the "Double V," for victory at home and victory abroad. For African Americans, the fight to make the world safe for democracy did not end with the U.S. victory. The success black soldiers had in defeating fascism abroad motivated them to be more demanding in their fight for racial equality at home. In Phoenix, for example, on Friday, May 17, 1946, Morris

Eleanor Dickey Ragsdale, *ca.* 1950. Courtesy, Lincoln Ragsdale, Jr.

Lincoln J. Ragsdale, *ca.* 1957. *Courtesy, Lincoln Ragsdale, Jr.*

Graham of the black owned and operated *Arizona Sun*, reported that "a picket line of about 15 Negro and white people marched before the Phoenix Woolworth store protesting its discrimination policies." Woolworth's did not "allow Negroes at its food counter," and did not "hire any Negro clerks." The picketer's signs reminded whites that "Negroes had fought a recent war for democracy, but were denied democracy in their own country."[4]

The Ragsdale's transition from Oklahoma and Pennsylvania was part of a massive migration of African Americans to the Western United States. Although World War II highlighted the disjuncture between America's promise of freedom and democracy, and its unequal treatment of African Americans, the war, and the industries which arose to support it, improved the prospect of good jobs and a freer life for African Americans in the West. As a result, a huge migration ensued that greatly increased black population in the region. This migration furnished many of the leaders and participants in the West's emerging Civil Rights Movement. It also paved the way for African American success in business, Western politics, and multiculturalism. The Ragsdales were among this historic group of migrants. They brought with them a tempered optimism and a determination which emerged out of the Double V campaign, and a desire to capitalize on the meager gains made by African Americans, primarily in defense industries, during the war years. Lincoln Ragsdale brought to Phoenix a distinguished military record, cunning, ambition, and a brashness that was no doubt a product of his military service and background as a third generation black professional in-the-making. Eleanor brought with her a steely intelligence and a composed intensity, that was matched only by her patience and persistence.

The two met in Phoenix in 1947 and were married in 1949. Not long after relocating to Phoenix, the newlyweds became painfully aware that the city was not unlike the communities they left behind. It was racially segregated, and the dominant European American social order supported and maintained a white supremacist system designed "for Anglos by Anglos."[5] Phoenix was a small, isolated city at the time, so the Ragsdale's, like many black newcomers, believed that African Americans would not experience the same amount of racial discrimination and lack of mobility that marked the lives of most African Americans. The Ragsdales came to understand quickly that the concept of a more racially inclusive West was specious. Legal and extralegal racial segregation had exited in Phoenix from the city's earliest times. African Americans were systematically locked out of the dominant Euro-American society in Phoenix; segregated from whites, and sometimes Asian and Mexican Americans in places of public accommodation, schools, social clubs, and even cemeteries.

Generally, Phoenix's race relations resembled those throughout the nation. They were "separate, hostile, and unequal."[6]

By 1949, demobilization and *de jure* and *de facto* segregation began to exacerbate the social and economic ills of the nation's black communities. Black Phoenicians, led by Lincoln and Eleanor Ragsdale, responded in a more strategic manner to the problems which faced them. The Ragsdales, like their counterparts across the nation, brought the reality of white supremacy and racial segregation to the forefront of local and national news.[7] Between 1949 and 1953, Lincoln Ragsdale enhanced his education by graduating from Arizona State Teacher's College, now Arizona State University, continued in the family tradition by completing a degree in Mortuary Science, and forged the first of many business ventures in the Chapel in the Valley Mortuary at 1100 East Jefferson Street in Phoenix. With the help of Eleanor, who he described as being the most "fearless" member of the duo, the World War II fighter pilot stepped forward to "shoot down" racial discrimination in the form of residential segregation in Phoenix.[8]

The Ragsdales became members of a number of organizations that attacked racial segregation. They joined the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Phoenix Urban League (PUL). They were also among the founders of the Greater Phoenix Council for Civic Unity (GPCCU) in 1948, the same year that President Truman issued Executive Order 9981 desegregating the U.S. military. Established in the 1940s, the GPCCU worked to eliminate "discrimination in Phoenix and surrounding communities, and to cooperate with local, state, and national groups working toward the same ends."[9] The couple would play an active role in the GPCCU's fight against racial injustice in Phoenix. Eleanor, in addition to her political activities, teaching, and work in the family business, became active in various religious and secular associations where she spoke out often about the injustices of racial segregation and the many problems that black Phoenicians faced. The conditions for African Americans in Phoenix following World War II were primarily rueful. The majority of black Phoenicians lived at or below the poverty line in segregated neighborhoods dotted by substandard housing and economic isolation. The vast majority of black Phoenicians rented their homes or apartments, over fifty percent of them lived in housing without lavatories or running water. Unsanitary conditions and inadequate nutrition created acute health concerns, and with the exception of a limited amount of educational attainment, African Americans in Phoenix were generally at the bottom of most socio-economic indices. Most of these conditions were fostered and intensified by the inability of black people to make inroads in the labor market. African Americans in Phoenix, unlike their counterparts on the West coast and other regions of the country, were excluded from white unions until the 1950s.

Despite the obstacles which faced them, black Phoenicians continued to develop their own community and institutions as they had done since the second half of the 19th century. African Americans in Phoenix frequented the Ramona and Westside theaters, where they watched films with "all colored casts." Musician and disc jockey Curtis Grey provided music and news of interest to black Phoenicians on the KPHO radio station. The Miss Bronze Arizona pageant proved to be a popular event, and Zeta Phi Beta and Delta Sigma Theta sororities presented "outstanding women" of the community awards and sponsored charitable events. Eleanor Ragsdale became an active member of the Phoenician chapter of Delta Sigma Theta. Fraternities such as Lincoln Ragsdale's own Sigma Pi Phi sponsored local programming and social events. Local leaders and groups worked diligently to enhance the black community's cultural and political awareness.[10]

Most African Americans who migrated to the city were from Southern states where many performed agricultural work. Phoenix's cotton and citrus industries attracted many of these laborers. Ragsdale, through an off-shoot of his mortuary business, offered these migrants low-cost burial insurance, which was one of the few "investments in their future" that black Phoenicians could make.[11] Most black migrants could not afford much in the way of health care, but most managed to save enough money to buy inexpensive insurance policies. Insurance policies enabled black people to have elegant funeral ceremonies that provided a stark contrast to their bleak lives. Ragsdale's efforts may not have been entirely altruistic. It can be argued that he may have been exploiting the poor economic status of migrant labor as well. Ragsdale also saw a void in the housing market for African Americans in Phoenix. He soon entered the real estate business. When he elected to do so, housing opportunities for black Phoenicians were limited and primarily confined to the economically and politically isolated area of South Phoenix. In 1950 Ragsdale founded the Ragsdale Realty and Insurance Agency. In doing so he capitalized on Phoenix's segregated burial industry and housing market, and offered new opportunities in commerce and housing to African Americans.

Lincoln's new enterprises pulled him in many directions and he soon figured out that he needed help in administering the family businesses. During the first year of the Ragsdale's marriage, Lincoln managed to keep things together. Emily Ragsdale, the youngest child of Lincoln and Eleanor, explained that by their second year as husband and wife, Lincoln needed Eleanor "to come work with him, because he knew that he wouldn't be able to continue the business without her help and support." Eleanor continued to teach for as long as she could, but by the end of 1950 she "ended up

coming to work in the mortuary and helping to build the business." Eleanor obtained her insurance license and was involved in every aspect of the Ragsdale Realty and Insurance Agency. She also resigned from her teaching position in anticipation of the Ragsdale's first child. Between 1951 and 1957, the Ragsdale's would have four children; three girls and one boy. Eleanor referred to them as her "stair-step family," as Elizabeth Estelle, Gwendolyn Onlia, Lincoln Johnson, Jr., and Emily Ragsdale were born virtually one after the other.[12] The Ragsdales had demanding schedules. Eleanor's many obligations placed her at the center of their growing family and their budding enterprises. In addition to working in the family businesses, she devoted a great deal of her time negotiating political partnerships with their clients and associates, black churches in Phoenix and across the country, and most importantly, black women's clubs and voluntary associations. It was these kind of organizing efforts and fund raising capabilities that would eventually make black women such as Eleanor the foundation of the Phoenician and national Civil Rights Movements.

Ironically, it was Eleanor's work in the real estate industry which led to the Ragsdales leading the way in desegregating Phoenician neighborhoods. Not long after Lincoln and Eleanor were married the couple decided to seek housing outside of the mortuary complex. With their growing financial success, experience in real estate, and their connections in the construction industry, Eleanor and Lincoln were soon able to purchase their first home and move out of the mortuary compound, which boasted living quarters and a reception hall. In 1950 the couple built a duplex at 1110 East Jefferson Street and moved into one of its units. Lincoln remembered the area around East Lake Park in central Phoenix as "the nicest neighborhood we had in Phoenix that was available to blacks."[13] The Ragsdales lived in the home on East Jefferson Street for a couple years. During that time Eleanor gave birth to their first child, Elizabeth Estelle Ragsdale, on December 4, 1951. Eleanor became pregnant with their second child in 1953. The couple decided it was necessary to move into a larger home after learning of Eleanor's pregnancy. They set out to purchase a new home in the summer of 1953.

The Ragsdale's had already set their sights on what they believed was the perfect home in 1952. The home was located in Northern Phoenix at 1606 West Thomas Road in a well-to-do neighborhood. The Ragsdales were riding a wave of financial success and opted to reward themselves and their growing family with a larger more expensive home. Lincoln and Eleanor were faced with a major problem, however, and it had nothing to do with being able to afford the home. The house on Thomas Road was nestled in the Encanto District, a predominantly white neighborhood near Phoenix's large Encanto Park. African Americans and other minorities were

In 1953, over a year before the U.S. Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, Arizona Superior Court Judge Fred C. Struckmeyer, Jr., ruled against a bill passed by the state legislature permitting school boards to segregate African American students.
Arizona Collection, Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Hayden Library, Arizona State University

barred from purchasing homes in the area. It also bordered the historic Palmcroft Subdivision District, which was notorious for being an affluent, "whites only" neighborhood. The Ragsdale failed to appreciate the flagrant racial chauvinism that inspired and maintained such a restricted area. They found the home they wanted and undertook to acquire it.

The Palmcroft subdivision, and the white neighborhoods surrounding it had barred minorities in Phoenix for decades. The Phoenix Real Estate Board, after 1924, adopted the new code of ethics of the National Association of Real Estate Boards. Realtors had to conform to Article 34 of the national code, which stated that they "never be instrumental in introducing into a neighborhood members of any race or nationality, or any individuals detrimental to property values in that neighborhood."[14] Any realtor willing to break this code was subjected to stiff penalties by the association. Dwight B. Heard, a New England business leader who migrated to Chicago, then on to Phoenix in 1895, played a critical role in establishing one of Phoenix's most exclusive racially segregated white neighborhoods. Dwight B.

Heard Investment Company, the most powerful real estate brokerage firm in Phoenix, utilized its owner's Machiavellian entrepreneurial skills to establish itself as a dominant force in the economic, political, and social development of Phoenix. Heard not only operated his real estate business, he also owned the *Arizona Republican*, one of the city's most influential newspapers, and the Bartlett-Heard Land and Cattle Company. Herbert Ely, an attorney, civil rights activist, and close Ragsdale friend, argued that "the business community and the newspaper," led by leaders such as Heard, "were absolutely opposed to the notion" of changing the status quo. Representing the status quo from its beginnings was the *Arizona Republican*, "the dominant force in the community."[15]

Heard wielded his formidable authority in politics and other aspects of life in Phoenix and the rest of the state. He has been credited with being the driving force behind the bringing of the Central Avenue Bridge, South Mountain Park, and other benefits to the Phoenix area. A friend of president Theodore Roosevelt, he also played a pivotal role in the construction of the Roosevelt Dam. In addition to being active in the Episcopal Church, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), the Boy Scouts of America, and the University of Arizona, Heard provided land for what is now Phoenix's highly regarded Heard Museum. His Palmcroft Subdivision, heralded as a high class development, was established in 1926 after his company bought 80 acres of land from the half-section estate of James W. Doris.

Bound by West McDowell Road, North 15th Avenue, West Thomas Road, and North 7th Avenue, the 80 acres were split into two 40-acre plats by Heard. The easterly 40 acres were the first to be developed. Advertisements for Palmcroft asked "why is Palmcroft the ideal?" The "contemplated palm bordered winding drives," and "quiet and clean" location which was "only five minutes by auto from downtown" made it ideal the advertisement offered. Costs ranged from $850 to $5,000 for the most opulent homes. Heard affectionately referred to his picturesque Palm Croft home as the "Casa Blanca."[16] What Palmcroft's brochures did not reveal were the race restrictions which prohibited the sale of its property to "those having perceptible strains of Mexican, Spanish, Asiatic, Negro or Indian blood."[17] The creation of the Palmcroft subdivision by Heard helped firmly root an unequal racial hierarchy in Phoenix. It helped relegate black people to the periphery of Phoenix's inner circle of socio-economic elite, by separating African Americans from substantive interactions and dealings with those whites who collectively controlled the means of production and distribution in Phoenix. Even those African Americans who could afford to buy a home in the Palmcroft area were refused.

On March 15, 1929, Heard was remembered as "Arizona's greatest citizen" by the *Arizona Republican*· He was instrumental in the economic growth of Phoenix and the surrounding valley, and in the introduction and maintenance of racial segregation and white supremacy in Phoenix until well into the second half of the 20th century. Black Phoenicians like the Ragsdales were spurned by a restricted neighborhood which housed many of the communities most influential people; a neighborhood which was constructed by Heard. Heard did little, if anything, to challenge exclusionary practices based on race perpetrated by the Phoenix Real Estate Board and the National Association of Real Estate Boards. The silence and indifference on the issue of racial segregation by Heard was in many ways as detrimental to minorities as the vitriolic words and violent actions of the Ku Klux Klan. Restrictive race policies and the silent support or submission of powerful men like Heard, accomplished the objective of preventing black people from moving into the Palmcroft subdivision. More importantly, it kept African Americans out of the pipeline which ultimately lead to substantive economic and political power.

Heard, heralded as "Arizona's greatest citizen," while also being rumored to have been the Exalted Cyclops of the Phoenix chapter of the Ku Klux Klan, may have intentionally established a racially restrictive community, and secretly held more overt racial animosities. In fact, the Klan staged rallies, mass meetings, and marches in support of local candidates, most notably Dwight B. Heard himself, who was a Republican candidate for Governor in 1924. Whether Heard was a "card carrying" member of the Klan will most likely remain unsubstantiated, but what is certain is that Heard, whether by neglect or design, contributed to the maintenance of a white supremacist system and a history of prejudice. As early as the 1920s, and certainly by late 1940s therefore, a large number of Phoenix white male boosters, realtors, political leaders, and business owners, through overt action and tacit compliance, firmly rooted the pillars of racial segregation in the city. In fact, Ms. Hallie Q. Brown, the noted African American educator and national president of the Colored Federation of Women's Clubs, was compelled to purchase her winter home some four miles East of Phoenix, on Tempe Road, in the Portland tract, because African Americans were denied access to property in affluent white Phoenician neighborhoods. This area was marketed as "the first restricted district for colored people ever offered for sale in America."[18]

Indeed, segregated from whites residentially, black Phoenicians formed their own neighborhoods. As early as 1911, an African American businessman named John E. Lewis purchased a building on West Washington Street from Frank Shirley and created the Lewis Apartments. Lewis "provided living accommodations for traveling blacks" who were denied the opportunity to stay in white owned establishments. Lewis, who was also co-owner of the Fashion Square Barber Shop with

Frank Shirley, labeled his lodge a "hotel for colored people," while noting that "all the better class of hotels and rooming houses cater exclusively to white people. There are few cheap places where a colored man can find accommodations, but there are many colored men who do not care to patronize such places, both because the accommodations are poor and because of the low class of humanity often met there."[19]

Realtor Marshall Shelton subdivided tracts of land on Van Buran Street, and by 1930 on that land he had created a black amusement park, pool, and dance pavilion that catered primarily to blacks. As a result, the two black residential neighborhoods already in existence, gradually expanded. One concentration extended Southward from Washington Street to Buckeye Road and Eastward from Central Avenue to Sixteenth Street. The second black community was located in Southwestern Phoenix in the area bounded by Seventh and Seventeenth Avenues, extending from Madison Street to South of Buckeye Road. Between 1920 and 1950, the majority of black Phoenicians migrated from highly segregated sections of the rural South. Many of these newcomers had never shared the same neighborhoods with white people, and were not inclined to do so in their new home. Moreover, a large portion of these new migrants were poor and did not possess the funds to live anywhere but the most inexpensive areas of the city, the economically depressed and politically estranged black neighborhoods. Due to this high concentration of poverty and socio-economic marginalization, conditions in black residential areas became noted for "illegal games of chance," "illicit drugs," "liquor," and "sexual favors" between 1930 and 1950. Many local law enforcement officers labeled African American neighborhoods "notorious darktowns," or "Nigger Towns," and routinely referred to their low-stakes dice games, an activity which landed many of them in jail, as "African golf" or "Harlem polo." Black Phoenicians who could afford to leave the "notorious darktowns," were refused mortgages in white neighborhoods by white owned loan companies for fear of losing licenses and "their white customers."[20] Regardless of their financial status, some African Americans simply wished to remain in the black community for ideological and cultural reasons

Restrictive covenants and racial segregation in the "Valley of the Sun" found cunning adversaries in the Ragsdales. Eleanor used her knowledge of the real estate market, and the color consciousness of many white people, to manipulate the system. As a real estate broker, she knew what homes were for sale and their purchase price. The home on West Thomas Road, far from the African American enclaves in South Phoenix, came to her attention early. Eleanor was able to enter the home and view it carefully and patiently. The agents who

Left to right: Lincoln Ragsdale, John Van Landingham, J. D. Holmes, Wade Church, and Hazel B. Daniels, 1953. This distinguished group of community activists, lawyers, and judges fought discrimination both in the schools and in the greater Phoenix community.

Courtesy, Lincoln J. Ragsdale, jr.

admitted her presumed she was white. As a very fair skinned African American woman with a manner of speaking that betrayed her Eastern heritage, she was able to view homes that most black people could not. "My mother could have passed for white if she wanted to," Emily Ragsdale posits, "but she was black, and would not have done that." She slipped into the home and never mentioned her race. She simply let the white agent's rigid sense of color and race work against them. Eleanor figured that when she "moved in with her little black children and her black husband," they would know that she and her family "were black."[21] The only glimpse Lincoln was able to get of the home was at night as Eleanor drove him down the alley behind the home. He would look out of the windows of the car at what he hoped would be his future home.

When they were not permitted to purchase the home at 1606 West Thomas Road, they found a way to circumvent the restrictive covenant which barred them. Lincoln and Eleanor had a white friend purchase the home, and when the contract was still in escrow the friend transferred the title to the Ragsdales. Since Eleanor spent her childhood years in integrated Pennsylvania communities, she had no qualms about the move. "Go ahead and buy the house if you like it," Lincoln had told her. As a result of the under-the-table dealings which allowed them to purchase the home, the Ragsdales moved into the house almost sight unseen. Although they had acquired the house they wanted to buy, their problems were far from over. When they arrived to move into their new home, Lincoln Ragsdale remembered, the realtors "wouldn't let me in."[22] This was the beginning of a relationship between the neighborhood's residents and the Ragsdales that was fraught with discord. Journalist Lori K. Baker reported that "although the Ragsdales lived in the house for seventeen years and raised four children there, relations with neighbors remained icy at best." "Within a month of their move," three members of a neighborhood "improvement" committee appeared at the Ragsdale's door step. They rang the door bell. When Lincoln answered, he was greeted by one of his neighbors who told him that "we know you're not going to be happy here." The committee proceeded to offer to buy the Ragsdale home if the family would be willing to move. Offended, Lincoln told the group in no uncertain terms that "the house is not for sale."[23]

Following this encounter the harassment worsened. One morning the family awoke to find the word "nigger" spray-painted on their white block home in "two-foot-high black letters." Lincoln refused to remove the racial epitaph from his wall because he "wanted to make sure that the white folks knew where the Nigga lived."[24] Lincoln and Eleanor resisted the guardians of white residential purity. By refusing to remove the racial epitaph, the Ragsdales flaunted their presence in a previously all-white neighborhood. By demonstrating their determination and courage, the Ragsdales transformed the humiliation of white despotism into a declaration of dignity. In the process, they alerted their neighbors of their distinction and self-respect. Simultaneously the family was terrorized by threatening phone calls: "Move out, nigger," the callers demanded. Harassing Lincoln Ragsdale appears to have been a rite of passage for new police officers who patrolled the neighborhood. Lincoln often returned home late at night in his Cadillac sedan. Having been routinely stopped in his car, Ragsdale recalled that "I looked suspicious" to them. "All you have to do to look suspicious is to be driving a Cadillac and be black. When I'd see him coming with his lights, I'd get my ownership of the car out and [*prepare it*] show him my drivers' license." The police officer would interrogate Ragsdale: "What are you doing here, boy? Where are you going? The police queried. "It was always boy," Ragsdale recalled with a hint of acrimony in his voice. "Here were these guys just out of high school calling me 'boy'" he waxed.[25]

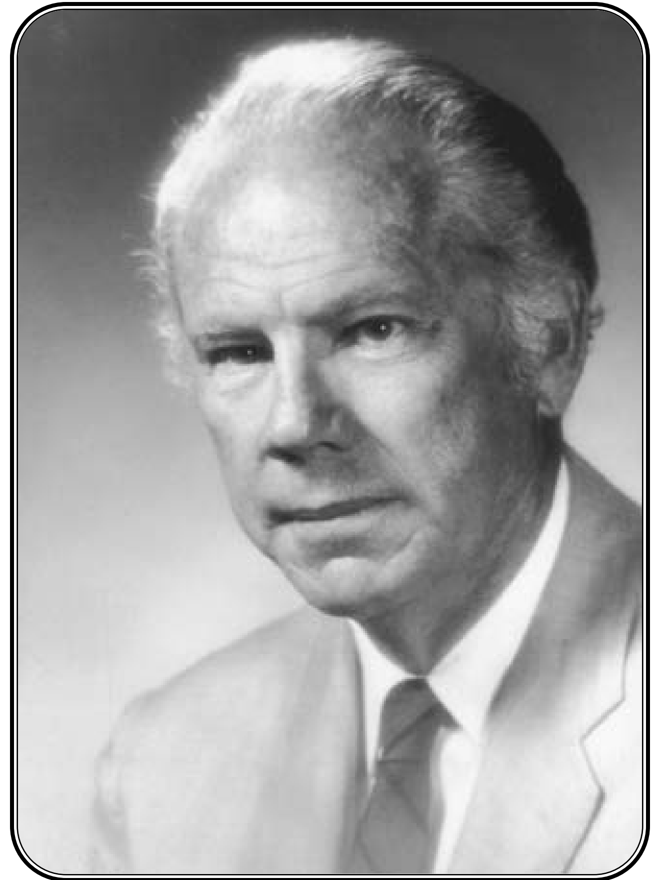
The Ragsdale children were not spared the racist harassment that Lincoln and Eleanor were subjected to. They were treated poorly by many of the neighborhood's white children. Eleanor recalled one moment that left her disheartened and angry. One afternoon Elizabeth, Lincoln and Eleanor's eldest daughter, then in fourth grade, came home from school and told her mother that someone called her a "tar baby." Elizabeth knew that she had been insulted, but she did not know what the phrase meant. She asked her mother to explain. Eleanor was left with the arduous task of having to deflect the potentially damaging effects of white supremacist ideology and discrimination. "To soothe Elizabeth," Eleanor told her what the phrase meant, but she also told her that "life was like a flower garden: You need many colors to make it beautiful."[26] Eleanor's comforting words calmed Elizabeth and helped her as she moved through gradeschool, but her high school memories proved to be even more bitter; one of a few black children in a predominantly white school, Elizabeth was isolated and was never asked to dance at any school function, such as homecoming or prom.

Eleanor worked hard to not let the racism which surrounded them effect her children. "My mother was very stern about the concept of her children becoming racist or being sensitive about the color issue," Emily Ragsdale recalls. "My mother never allowed my father to use the words black or white around the home. When they talked about [*race*] issues they said 'B' or 'W'. Emily Ragsdale argues that her mother and father understood the significance of race, and believed it was necessary to break the color line in housing in Phoenix. As a result, "they were forerunners to [*integrate*] into neighborhoods that blacks were not allowed. It added "extra pressure to us kids," she argued. "We didn't really know any different," however; "going to all-white schools, living in an all-white neighborhood. But we knew that,

you know, we were the only ones who looked like us though."[27]

Lincoln Johnson Ragsdale, Jr. believes that after a certain age the Ragsdale children knew that their harassment and estrangement was a direct result of white racism and their parent's roles as leaders and activists in the Phoenician community. Sometimes [*white*] teachers were hostile to the Ragsdale children because they believed their "father was doing something that he shouldn't be doing." Lincoln and Eleanor often feared for the safety of their children, and instructed them to be extremely careful with whom they chose to speak and interact. For Lincoln, Jr., his parent's instructions to "don't take candy from strangers" took on added meaning. "If I would have taken candy from a stranger," he maintains, "it might have been the last candy bar I might have eaten." Not simply because he might have been "taken advantage of or molested," but because "there might have been some other issues [*at work*]." Lincoln, Jr. argues that he had to also be concerned about his mortality because he may have fallen victim to "racism, [*the Ku Klux*] Klan, or some other white supremacy group." He was aware that he "might have been a victim" of white supremacy and of his "father's activity in civil rights." Despite the younger Lincoln's caution and concern, the Ragsdale children understood the importance of their parent's work on behalf of black Phoenicians and the cause of racial equality. Although they may not have fully grasped the significance of their family's desegregation of the Palm-Croft neighborhood at the time, as they grew older they developed a deeper appreciation for the implications of their actions and the meaning of their sacrifice.[28]

Following their history making effort to desegregate Phoenix's exclusive Encanto-Palm Croft residential Districts, the Ragsdales continued to serve as leaders of the black freedom struggle in Phoenix throughout the remainder of the 20th century. Although the campaign for civil rights in Arizona was largely a grassroots movement, key battles were won at the ballot box, court, and state legislature. In each case the leadership of the Ragsdales remained pivotal. After Lincoln and Eleanor, backed by the NAACP, GPCCU, and PUL, helped force the desegregation of Phoenix's public schools in 1953, one year before the landmark Supreme Court *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* decision, the two leaders shifted the efforts to make Phoenix a more inclusive place in political and economic fields. Lincoln Ragsdale, for example, joined with six other local leaders in 1963 to form the Phoenix's Action Citizens Committee (ACT) political campaign. ACT sought the election of its members to the Phoenix City Council. They erected a platform calling for a public accommodations bill, open housing, and job opportunities for minorities. Although Lincoln was not elected, he helped bring the issue of minority political participation to the front pages of local news. He also helped bring these issues to



Maricopa County attorney William P. Mahoney, Jr., helped spearhead the effort to desegregate Arizona's public schools.
Arizona Collection, Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Hayden Library, Arizona State University

the attention of local conservative political power brokers such as the Charter Government Committee, a delegation that was dominated by newspaper magnate Eugene Pulliam, and businessman and would-be political legend Barry Goldwater. Lincoln and Eleanor helped organize Phoenicians of all persuasions to protest the discriminatory hiring practices of Arizona's leading corporations, including Motorola and General Electric.

Despite receiving far less consideration than Lincoln by historians, Eleanor, like most black women in the Civil Rights Movement, took a leading role in fighting racism. Eleanor, like her peers throughout the nation, generally took on less visible roles in the movement. These roles provided a leadership and activist outlet for black women, and assisted, sometimes unwillingly and often grudgingly, African American men in reclaiming the boldness and sense of manhood that they believed had been denied them by a white supremacist society. Eleanor and other black female activists also accepted secondary roles in an effort to appear unified with their black male counterparts in the face of an often overwhelmingly antagonistic white majority. Nevertheless, women like Eleanor exercised tremendous authority, informally as committed players, and formally as members of institutions such as the NAACP and the

GPCCU. Black women such as Eleanor Ragsdale, often shouldering the dual burden racism and sexism (racism, sexism, *and* poverty in the case of a great many black women) fought for racial liberation while displaying a certain level of toleration for the sexism of black men. This is especially true of the 1960s, which according to Darlene Clark Hine, was in many ways a "decade of testosterone"; an era marked by the often zealous efforts of activists and historians to reclaim what they perceived to be usurped black male masculinity.[29] In this masculinist climate, female activists like Eleanor, were nevertheless able to play a leading role in ushering in some social, economic, and political progress. Whether she served as a primary leader in the Palm-Croft campaign, or as a facilitator in the movement to desegregate Phoenician schools, Eleanor, like many of her black female peers, emerged as foundational leader of a local movement with national implications during this critical period of Civil Rights Movement.

Despite the activism of both Lincoln and Eleanor Ragsdales, *de jure* desegregation, and the emergence of postwar opportunities such as the G.I. Bill, racial discrimination and inequality continued. While activists such as the Ragsdales squared off with local white leaders and worked to make significant strides toward racial equality, advancement during the 1960s was sluggish. Blacks continued to fare far worse than their white counterparts. President Lyndon B. Johnson's "Great Society" eradicated some of the lingering legal barriers facing African Americans. It provided for the creation of many social and educational programs that targeted black children, aided young African Americans earning a college education, reaffirmed black citizenship and voting rights, and destroyed legal barriers to the ballot box. The 1964 Opportunity and Civil Rights Acts, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act are examples of such measures. The majority of African Americans continued to lag behind, however, and issues such as education, economic opportunity and police brutality remained, and in some cases, intensified. Although measures like restrictive covenants were legally eradicated by 1968, "red lining" by real estate companies and low wages made it virtually impossible for most African Americans to buy homes in areas to their liking. Job discrimination also prevented them from securing employment, and few educational opportunities made it difficult for black people to compete for well paying jobs.

Despite these conditions, blacks succeeded in improving their lives and mobility. In 1953, Lincoln and Eleanor Ragsdale took one of the first steps toward making Phoenix a more inclusive city by desegregating its most prestigious and exclusive residential neighborhood without the aid of legislation or violence. This milestone ushered in an era of unparalleled changes in the city's social, economic, and political structure. Similar events occurred throughout the nation, providing freedom and opportunity for many African Americans heretofore unattainable in American history. The Ragsdales were among the first generation of black people to enjoy this new freedom and opportunity. Even as the Ragsdales and other leaders relished their successes, however, many lamented the fact that the majority of blacks were mired in poverty. Persistent racial discrimination, joblessness, severely limited educational opportunities, poor health conditions, unprecedented urban violence, and the hopelessness associated with them, were all directly related to nearly four hundred years of white supremacy in America. Without additional changes at the local, state, and federal level, in addition to the private sector, African American leaders such as the Ragsdales argued that the majority of black people would continue to suffer economically.

In the face of these conditions, however, the leadership of the Ragsdales gave hope and inspiration to many black Phoenicians, and helped provide the impetus for some of the earliest and most progressive victories during the early years of the Civil Rights Movement. The Ragsdales, often through their own force of will, and with the support of groups such as the NAACP and the GPCCU, helped change retrograde, racist laws, and alter the manner in which African Americans and civil rights were managed in Phoenix when white supremacy was practiced and celebrated by the preponderance of the people. Despite the problems related to racial discrimination in Phoenix and America, the Ragsdales were willing to step forward and lead when it would have been easier to stay in the shadows. The direct and indirect action of Western black activists like the Ragsdales did not eliminate racial grievances or inequality. Their efforts, however, helped destroy *de jure* segregation in public schools and one of the major obstacles on the road to racial equality. Their activism and commitment to tolerance and diversity helps demonstrate how far Phoenix and America has come since World War II, and, perhaps, how far it has to go. The Ragsdale legacy speaks directly to the nature of past problems, the power of individuals to confront them, and the possibilities of change.

NOTES

1. A. Philip Randolph, *The Messenger*, (Dec. 1, 1948).
2. *Ragsdale Family History* (Phoenix, 2000); Lincoln and Eleanor Ragsdale, interview by Dean E. Smith, 4 April and 3 November 1990, Phoenix, Arizona, tape recordings, Arizona Collection, Arizona State University, Tempe (hereafter, TP, ACASU); Universal Memorial Center, Inc.: *A Celebration and Worship Service Honoring the Life of Dr. Lincoln Johnson Ragsdale, Sr.* (Phoenix, 1995), 3; *A Celebration and Worship Service Honoring the Life of Eleanor Dickey Ragsdale* (Phoenix, 1998), 3-14.
3. Universal, *Dr. Lincoln Johnson Ragsdale, Sr*, 3; Universal, *Ragsdale Family History*, 1; Lincoln Ragsdale, Enlisted Record of and Report of Separation: Honorable Discharge WD, AGO Form 53-55, Air Corps (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Army Air Corps, November 19, 1945); Universal, *Mrs. Eleanor Dickey Ragsdale*, 3-14.
4. (Phoenix) *Arizona Sun*, Friday, May 17, 1946.
5. Bradford Luckingham, *Minorities in Phoenix: A Profile of Mexican American, Chinese American, and African American Communities, 1860-1992* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994), 8.

6. See Andrew Hacker, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995).
7. Bradford Luckingham, *Phoenix: The History of a Southwestern Metropolis* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989), 66.
8. Herb Whitney, "Shooting Down Racism: Civic Leader Recalls Battle to Win Dignity," *Arizona Republic* (Phoenix, 1990), 1.
9. Greater Phoenix Council for Civil Unity, ed., *To Secure These Rights* (Phoenix, 1961), 9-13, 17-46.
10. Irene McClellan King quoted in, Irene McClellan King, interview by Maria Hernandez, Summer 1981, Phoenix, Arizona. Tape recording, Arizona Collection, Hayden Library, Arizona State University, Tempe.
11. Lincoln Ragsdale, Jr., interview by author, 6 April 2000, Phoenix, Arizona. Tape recording and transcript, Arizona Collection, Hayden Library, Arizona State University, Tempe (hereafter TP, ACASU).
12. Emily Ragsdale quoted in Emily Ragsdale, interview by author, 6 April 2000, Phoenix, Arizona. Tape recording and Transcript, Arizona Collection, Hayden Library, Arizona State University, Tempe (hereafter TP and TS, ACASU).
13. Lincoln and Eleanor Ragsdale, interview by Dean E. Smith, TP, ACASU.
14. Phoenix Real Estate Board Charter, quoted in Michael J. Kotlanger, "Phoenix Arizona, 1920-1940," (Ph.D. Diss., Arizona State University, 1983), 445-446.
15. Herbert L. Ely quoted in Herbert L. Ely, interview by author 17 July 2000, Phoenix, Arizona. Tape recording, Arizona Collection, Hayden Library, Arizona State University, Tempe.
16. United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service in Cooperation with the Phoenix Historic Preservation Commission. *Encanto-Palmcroft Historic District Publication*. National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, Continuation Sheet 81, (Item Number 8), 3, 9.
17. Kotlanger, "Phoenix Arizona, 445-446.
18. Nimmons, Robert. "Arizona's Forgotten Past: The Negro in Arizona, 1539-1965," (M.S. Thesis, Northern Arizona University, 1971), 101; *Arizona Republican*, March 30, 1924, September 9, 1928.
19. Frank Shirley quoted in Nimmons, "Arizona's Forgotten Past," 101.
20. *Arizona Republican*, January 21, May 26, 1920, September 29, 1921, November 19, 1922; *Arizona Republic*, July 14, 1935.
21. Emily Ragsdale quoted in Emily Ragsdale, interview by author, TP, ACASU.
22. Lincoln Ragsdale quoted in Lincoln and Eleanor Ragsdale, interview by Dean E. Smith, TP, ACASU.
23. Baker, "The Man Who Refused to be Invisible," 97-98.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*
27. Emily Ragsdale quoted in Emily Ragsdale, interview by author, TP, ACASU.
28. Lincoln Ragsdale, Jr., interview by author, TP, ACASU.
29. Darlene Clark Hine quoted in "Which Way is Freedom?: Black Power and the Rise of Black Elected Officials," An address given at Cook Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, 1997.

Selected Readings

Cooper, Michael L. *The Double V. Campaign: African Americans and World War II* . New York: N.A.L., 1997.

Crawford, Vicki L., Jacqueline Anne Rouse, Barbara Woods, and Mrymal Dryden, eds.. *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.

Greater Phoenix Council For Civic Unity, ed., *To Secure These Rights*. Phoenix: Phoenix Sun Publishing Company, 1961.

Hackett, Mattie Hackett. "A Survey of Living Conditions of Girls in the Negro Schools of Phoenix, Arizona," (M.A. Thesis, Arizona State University, 1939), 43-50

Hine, Darlene Clark., and Kathleen Thompson. *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women in America*. New York: Broadway Books, 1998.

Holloway, Joseph E. *Africanisms in American Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.

Kelley, Robin D. G. *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*. New York: The Free Press, 1994.

Lawson, Steven F., and Charles Payne, *Debating The Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1968.* Lanham: Roman and Littlefield, 1998.

Marable, Manning Marable. *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990.* Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 1991.

Melcher, Mary. "Blacks and Whites Together: Interracial Leadership in the Phoenix Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of Arizona History* 32 (Summer 1991): 195-216.

Morgan, Anne Hodges, and Rennard Strickland, eds., *Arizona Memories*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1984.

Plater, Michael A. *African American Entrepreneurship in Richmond, 1890-1940: The Story of R. C. Scott*. New York: Garland Publishers, 1996.

Taylor, Quintard Taylor, Jr. *In Search of a Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1540-1990*. New York: Norton, 1998.

Matthew C. Whitaker is Assistant Professor of United States History at Arizona State University. He specializes in African American history, Comparative Black History, Critical Race Theory, the Civil Rights Movement and the American West. Professor Whitaker's current research focuses on African American leadership, activism, and the struggle for racial, economic, and gender equality in the American West. His articles have appeared in the *Western Historical Quarterly*, the *Encyclopedia of World Slavery*, and the *Encyclopedia of African American Organizations*. Dr. Whitaker's upcoming article on Black female Legislators will published in *Black Women in American: An Historical Encyclopedia, Second Edition*. The title of his forthcoming book is *"Race Work!": Lincoln and Eleanor Ragsdale and the Black Freedom Struggle in the American Southwest. 1946-2000.*