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“CREATIVE CONFLICT”:
LINCOLN AND ELEANOR RAGSDALE,
COLLABORATION, AND COMMUNITY ACTIVISM
IN PHOENIX, 1953–1965

MATTHEW C. WHITAKER

“Creative Conflict” examines the lives of Lincoln and Eleanor Ragsdale and their trail-blazing leadership during the height of the Civil Rights movement in Phoenix, Arizona. Between 1953 and 1965, through dynamic leadership and interracial coalition building, they helped attack racial discrimination and destroy de jure segregation in Phoenix.

“Conflicto Creativo” examina las vidas de Lincoln y Eleanor Ragsdale y sus esfuerzos de liderazgo durante el punto mas alto del movimiento derechos civiles en Phoenix, Arizona. Entre 1953 y 1965, a través de su liderazgo y su trabajo de colaboración entre las razas, ellos ayurdaron a atacar la discriminación de raza destruir la segregación “de jure” en Phoenix.

Race was the atmosphere one breathed from day to day, the pervasive irritant, the chronic allergy, the vague apprehension which made one uncomfortable and jumpy. We knew the race problem was like a deadly snake coiled and ready to strike, and that one avoided its dangers only by never-ending watchfulness.¹

Pauli Murray

BETWEEN 1953 AND 1965, fired with a passion for racial equality, Lincoln and Eleanor Ragsdale drew upon an arsenal of social-justice weapons in the battle for civil rights in Phoenix, Arizona. They helped dismantle an apartheid-like system in what is presently the sixth largest city in the U. S. The Ragsdales

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¹ Pauli Murray, *Pauli Murray: The Autobiography of a Black Activist, Feminist, Lawyer, Priest, and Poet* (Knoxville, TN, 1989), 36.

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and other western activists, though geographically isolated from the Civil Rights movement in the American South, were not strangers to white supremacy and black resistance. They were roused by years of racial discrimination, World War II, and America's promise of democracy, and sustained by a swelling African American population. They were also buoyed by the burgeoning postwar liberalism of a number of white western leaders. Armed with their experiences, hope, and passion, and aided by sympathetic white Phoenicians, the Ragsdales led the way in securing victories for racial justice in Phoenix, sometimes in advance of national milestones in civil rights.²

Between 1954 and 1965, America's Civil Rights movement peaked. Through an aggressive coalition of organizations, activists fought *de jure* and *de facto* racial segregation. They attacked segregation in the courts and through direct action protests such as sit-ins, boycotts, and other forms of civil disobedience. In the face of this onslaught, and despite persistent white resistance, legal segregation and disfranchisement collapsed. Although racism remained, and African Americans lagged behind their white counterparts economically and politically, blacks experienced unprecedented improvements in their socioeconomic mobility.³

The Phoenician movement, and activism throughout the West, as Quintard Taylor, Jr. has argued, "paralleled the movement East of the Mississippi with regard to strategy, tactics, and objectives." Nevertheless, the western movement took place in an environment where black people were often not the largest minority. In Phoenix, due to the city's small African American population, black leaders were compelled to form alliances with progressive whites and Mexican Americans. As a result, the multi-racial coalitions that were formed "pushed civil rights beyond black and white."⁴ The diversity of these alliances infused the Phoenician movement with a level of social capital, economic strength, and optimism that rarely existed in the South, or even in the Northwest. The optimism and determination of the Ragsdales, and that of other activists, produced many of the region's early civil rights victories. As early as 1951,

² See the following three books by Universal Memorial Center, Inc.: *A Celebration and Worship Service Honoring the Life of Dr. Lincoln Johnson Ragsdale, Sr.* (Phoenix, 1995), 3; *Ragsdale Family History* (Phoenix, 2000), 1; *A Celebration and Worship Service Honoring the Life of Mrs. Eleanor Dickey Ragsdale* (Phoenix, 1998), 3–14; Lincoln Ragsdale, Sr. 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). All of the information taken from oral interviews in this article are based upon audio taped recordings, not written transcripts.

³ Vincent Harding, Robin D. G. Kelley, and Earl Lewis, "We Changed the World, 1945–1970," in *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans*, ed. Robin D. G. Kelley and Earl Lewis (New York, 2000), 445–542.

⁴ Quintard Taylor, Jr., *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528–1990* (New York, 1998), 179–280; William Mahoney, interview by Mary Melcher, 16 February 1990. Tape recording, Arizona Historical Foundation, Arizona State University, Tempe (hereafter TP, AHFASU); Mary Melcher, "Blacks and Whites Together: Interracial Leadership in the Phoenix Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of Arizona History* 32 (Summer 1991): 292.

white Phoenician attorney and civil rights activist, William Mahoney, proclaimed that “the die is cast in the South or in an old city like New York or Chicago, but we here [in Phoenix] are present for creation. We’re making a society where the die isn’t cast. It can be for good or ill.”⁵

Although white supremacy and racial segregation existed in Phoenix from its birth, Phoenix’s racial etiquette was less violent than that of its southern counterparts. “The difference [in Phoenix],” argued John Barber, an early black Phoenician, “was that they didn’t lynch you.” The Ragsdales and other activists, therefore, believed that Phoenix held the potential to be more responsive to calls for justice than its southern counterparts. Their assessment of the city’s racial etiquette was sustained and productive. Indeed, in 1953, Eleanor Ragsdale played a leading role in desegregating Phoenix’s Encanto District, the city’s most affluent and racially segregated neighborhood. Also in 1953, the Ragsdales helped desegregate Phoenix schools one year before the landmark *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* decision of 1954. Lincoln Ragsdale, along with black activist, artist, and professor George B. Brooks, led the way in desegregating many of Phoenix’s most influential corporations as early as 1962. In 1963, Lincoln Ragsdale positioned himself as one of the cornerstones of a political campaign that wrested Phoenix city government out of the hands of an elite group of conservative white men. The Ragsdales were clever and potent, and their history demonstrates that no lacuna in effective African American leadership existed in Phoenix.⁶

Lincoln Ragsdale was born on 27 July 1926, in Ardmore, Oklahoma. He graduated from high school in Ardmore in 1944, during the height of World War II. He then entered the Air Force and was stationed at the legendary Tuskegee Flying School in Alabama. He graduated from Tuskegee in 1945, and relocated to Luke Air Force Base in Litchfield Park, Arizona, becoming one of the first black pilots to serve at that installation. After migrating to Phoenix, Lincoln Ragsdale continued in the family tradition by quickly becoming a successful mortician. Eleanor Dickey Ragsdale was born in Collingdale, Pennsylvania, on 23 February 1926. She finished high school in Darby, Pennsylvania, in 1943, and enrolled in Cheyney University of Pennsylvania. Eleanor graduated from Cheyney in 1947, and relocated to Phoenix, to pursue a career in teaching at Dunbar Elementary School.⁷

⁵ William Mahoney interview, TP, AHFASU.

⁶ John Barber, quoted in Richard E. Harris, *The First 100 Years: A History of Arizona Blacks* (Apache Junction, AZ, 1991), 124–5 and Melcher, “Blacks and Whites Together,” 198.

⁷ Universal, *Dr. Lincoln Johnson Ragsdale, Sr.*, 3 and *Ragsdale Family History*, 1; Lincoln Ragsdale, Enlisted Record of and Report of Separation: Honorable Discharge WD, AGO Form 53–5, Air Corps (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Air Corps, 19 November 1945); Universal, *Mrs. Eleanor Dickey Ragsdale*, 3–14. In addition to completing a degree in mortuary science, Lincoln also earned a Bachelor of Arts Degree in business from Arizona State University and eventually completed a doctorate in business administration from Union Graduate School in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Lincoln and Eleanor Ragsdale met in 1947 and were married in 1949, as their careers as entrepreneurs and activists were being launched. After settling in Phoenix, it became clear to the Ragsdales that the “desert oasis” was no paradise for African Americans. Phoenix was a small, isolated city when they arrived. Thus, there was a level of logic in the prevailing assumption that African Americans would be able to enjoy more mobility and less discrimination. Generally, however, Phoenix’s race relations mirrored those in most American cities. The Ragsdales, therefore, if they had entertained notions of the existence of a racially tolerant American West, were compelled to abandon such ideas quickly. African Americans were systematically locked out of the dominant Euro-American Phoenician society and were segregated from white people, and sometimes Mexican Americans, in housing, hospitals, public transportation, places of public accommodation, and cemeteries.⁸

The Ragsdales wasted little time. They became members of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Phoenix Urban League (PUL). The Ragsdales were also among the founders of the interracial Greater Phoenix Council for Civic Unity (GPCCU). 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.” Although Lincoln Ragsdale has received the majority of the credit for the family’s business acumen and legacy of activism, Eleanor was an influential leader in her own right. In 1953, the Ragsdales, led by the bold and clever actions of Eleanor, desegregated Phoenix’s previously all-white Encanto-Palm Croft residential neighborhood when they moved into their second home at 1606 West Thomas Road.⁹

It was the organizing efforts and fund-raising capabilities of black women such as Eleanor Ragsdale that provided the foundation of the Civil Rights movement. Supporting institutions such as the Phyllis Wheatley Community Center on Fourteenth and Jefferson Streets, established in 1927, Eleanor, like black women throughout American history, balanced multiple agendas while endeavoring to realize her personal goals and those of her family and community.¹⁰ As early as 1953, she was rearing two children, participating in the surging Phoenician Civil Rights movement, and responding to the unique concerns of black women in ways that Lincoln could or perhaps would not. She devoted a great deal of her time negotiating political partnerships with their clients and associates—black churches in Phoenix and across the

⁸ Universal, Mrs. *Eleanor Dickey Ragsdale*, 14; Eleanor Ragsdale, interview by Mary Melcher, Spring 1990, TP, AHFASU; Lincoln Ragsdale, Sr., interview by Mary Melcher, 8 April 1990, TP, AHFASU.

⁹ Universal, *Eleanor Ragsdale*, 14; Eleanor Ragsdale interview, TP, AHFASU; Greater Phoenix Council for Civic Unity, ed., *To Secure these Rights* (Phoenix, 1961), 9–13, 17–46.

¹⁰ Bradford Luckingham, *Phoenix: The History of a Southwestern Metropolis* (Tucson, 1989), 98. See Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy A Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894–1994* (New York, 1999).

country, and most importantly, black women's clubs and voluntary associations. By 1953, she retired from her teaching post to help manage the family's mortuary and investment company. She also obtained her insurance license and took a leading role in the Ragsdale Realty and Insurance Agency.¹¹

Ironically, it was Eleanor's work in the real estate industry that led to the desegregation of one of Phoenix's most discriminatory neighborhoods. During the summer of 1953, with their growing family and wealth, the Ragsdales decided to sell their first home at 1110 East Jefferson Street in order to purchase a larger one.¹² The Ragsdales set their sights on a home located at 1606 West Thomas Road, in an all-white, well-to-do North Phoenix neighborhood near the city's Encanto Park. African Americans and other racial minorities were barred from the Encanto District. People of color were banned because realtors and most Encanto residents believed their presence would undermine the community's stability and property values.¹³ As early as 1924, the Phoenix Real Estate Board ordered realtors to "never be instrumental in introducing into a neighborhood members of any race or nationality, or any individuals detrimental to property values in that neighborhood." Any realtor willing to break this code was subjected to stiff penalties by the association.¹⁴

Restrictive covenants and racial segregation in the Encanto District and similar neighborhoods found a cunning adversary in Eleanor Ragsdale. She used her knowledge of the real estate market, and exploited the retrograde color consciousness of many whites. 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 admitted her presumed she was white. As a very fair-skinned African American woman who spoke precise English, 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 posited, "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." The only glimpse

¹¹ Luckingham, *Phoenix*, 98.

¹² Lincoln and Eleanor interview, TP, ACASU.

¹³ Lincoln Ragsdale interview, TP, AHFASU; Lincoln and Eleanor interview, TP, ACASU; Emily Ragsdale, Lincoln Ragsdale, Jr., and William Dickey interviews, all by Matthew C. Whitaker, 6 April 2000, TP, ACASU; Lori K. Baker, "The Man Who Refused to Be Invisible," *Phoenix Magazine* 28, no. 1 (January 1993), 97–9; Herb Whitney, "Shooting Down Racism: Civic Leader Recalls Battle to Win Dignity," *Arizona Republic* (Phoenix) (1990), 1.

¹⁴ Phoenix Real Estate Board Charter, quoted in Michael J. Kotlanger, "Phoenix, Arizona, 1920–1940" (Ph.D. diss., Arizona State University, 1983), 445–6.

Lincoln was able to get of the home was at night as Eleanor drove him down the alley behind the home.¹⁵

When they were not permitted to purchase the home, they circumvented the restrictive covenant that barred them. Eleanor had a white friend purchase the home, and when the contract was still in escrow the friend transferred the title to the Ragsdales. Although they had acquired the house, 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." This was the beginning of a relationship between the neighborhood's residents and the Ragsdales that was fraught with discord. Lori K. Baker writes 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 rang the Ragsdale's door bell. When Lincoln answered, he was greeted by one of his neighbors, who told him, "We know you're not going to be happy here." The committee proceeded to offer to buy the Ragsdale home if the family would move. The Ragsdales refused to sell.¹⁶

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." Lincoln and Eleanor, through what historian Robin D. G. Kelley describes as "infrapolitics," resisted the guardians of white residential purity. By refusing to remove the racial epitaph from their home, 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. Eleanor repeated the process that had worked for them for other black families. Although these black families were often treated poorly by their white neighbors as well, Eleanor's actions successfully ended the exclusion of black people from Phoenix's most exclusive and influential community.¹⁷

¹⁵ Lincoln Ragsdale, interview by Mary Melcher, TP, AHFASU; Bradford Luckingham, *Minorities in Phoenix: A Profile of Mexican American, Chinese American, and African American Communities, 1860-1992* (Tucson, 1994), 164-5; Melcher, "Blacks and Whites Together," 203; Baker, "Invisible," 97-8; Lincoln and Eleanor interview, TP, ACASU; Emily Ragsdale, quoted in Emily Ragsdale interview, TP, ACASU.

¹⁶ Lincoln Ragsdale, interview by Mary Melcher, TP, AHFASU; Luckingham, *Minorities in Phoenix*, 164-5; Melcher, "Blacks and Whites Together," 203; Baker, "Invisible," 97-8.

¹⁷ Baker, "Invisible," 97-8; Lincoln and Eleanor interview, TP, ACASU; Emily Ragsdale interview, TP, ACASU; William Dickey interview, TP, ACASU; Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York, 1994), 8-9. Kelley emphasizes the black working class, but I believe his analysis can be applied in this case.

Although Eleanor took a leading role in combating racial segregation and injustice, Lincoln was the more outspoken and dynamic of the two. More often than not, Lincoln took on the more visible, official, and traditionally masculine leadership positions within the Civil Rights establishment. These positions, according to historian Harvard Sitkoff, helped black men regain self-confidence and a sense of manhood usurped by a racist society that was determined to emasculate them. The fact that Eleanor has received much less attention than Lincoln is perhaps an accurate reflection of her acceptance of a secondary leadership role and an accurate reflection of the fact that many historians, through the overuse of the “manhood” analogy, have “failed to consider the impact of the movement on black women’s consciousness,” and to recognize the contributions of women such as Eleanor Ragsdale to the movement. Like many black women, Eleanor probably accepted secondary roles in an effort to present a “united front to white authorities,” and she may have simply deferred to Lincoln, the more aggressive of the two, when aggression and audacity were necessary. Nevertheless, given the nature of patriarchy, she was no doubt relegated to auxiliary roles within the movement as well. As Anne Standley posits, “the argument that men were the principal leaders of the civil rights movement is not wholly inaccurate . . . sexism and authoritarian views of leadership prevented women from assuming command of any of the movement organizations.” Yet, women like Eleanor Ragsdale “exerted enormous influence,” both informally as “dedicated participants,” and formally as members of organizations such as the NAACP and the GPCCU. Whether serving as a primary leader, or as an enabler, Eleanor’s participation was key.¹⁸

In 1953, Lincoln and Eleanor were also instrumental in forcing the desegregation of Phoenix’s public primary and secondary schools, one year before the landmark Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*. Unlike the South, racial segregation at Arizona’s colleges and universities has never been a fiercely contested issue. Nevertheless, as early as 1951, Lincoln and Eleanor had helped the GPCCU, and other Civil Rights groups, successfully lobby the legislature to obtain a statute giving area primary and secondary school boards the option to desegregate voluntarily. Most Arizona schools desegregated; Phoenix schools, however, did not. Lincoln believed that Phoenix’s separate educational system was designed to “humiliate” black children and “teach them that they were inferior.” The effect of this treatment, Lincoln argued, was to control African Americans and keep them “subservient.” If a person is “beaten down and called a nigger often enough,” he asserted, “he begins to believe it.” “This is what the system [in] Arizona did.” Working with black Arizona legislators Hayzel B. Daniels and Carl Sims, and white leaders such as attorneys Herb

¹⁸ Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954–1980* (New York, 1981), 90; Anne Standley, “The Role of Black Women in the Civil Rights Movement,” in *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers & Torchbearers, 1941–1965*, ed. Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods (Bloomington, IN, 1993), 183–4; Baker, “Invisible,” 97–8; Lincoln and Eleanor interview, TP, ACASU; Emily Ragsdale interview, TP, ACASU; William Dickey interview, TP, ACASU.

Finn and William P. Mahoney, Jr., the Ragsdales responded to the recalcitrance of the Phoenix public school system by pressuring the white male-dominated Arizona court system into outlawing racial segregation.¹⁹

In June 1952, Daniels, Mahoney, and Finn filed a lawsuit "on behalf of plaintiffs Robert B. Phillips, Jr., Tolly Williams, and David Clark, three black children seeking admission to Phoenix Union High School." The suit named members of the school's governing board as defendants. Financed by the NAACP, the GPCCU, and the Ragsdales, the attorneys successfully argued the case in the Maricopa County Court against school segregation. Their arguments were based upon reasoning used in recent California segregation cases that attacked Mexican American school segregation. Lawyers in the California cases argued that the segregation of students for racial and ethnic reasons at the whim of school-board members was an "unconstitutional delegation of legislative power." In a landmark decision, Superior Court Judge Fred C. Struckmeyer handed down the first legal opinion in the United States declaring school segregation unconstitutional. Struckmeyer ruled that Arizona's school segregation laws were specious because they constituted an unconstitutional delegation of powers by the legislature to subordinate bodies.²⁰

Struckmeyer declared that "if the legislation can confer upon the school board the arbitrary power to segregate pupils of African ancestry from pupils of Caucasian ancestry, then the same right must exist to segregate pupils of French, German, Chinese, Spanish, or other ancestry; and if such unlimited and unrestricted power can be exercised on the basis of ancestry, it can be exercised on such a purely whimsical basis as the color of hair, eyes, or for any other reason as pure fancy might dictate." After delivering the decision, Struckmeyer proclaimed that "a half century of intolerance is enough." Eleanor Ragsdale remembered sitting in the courtroom, after participating in a contentious struggle to desegregate the city's education system, the day Struckmeyer rendered his decision. "I felt it was a giant step in the right direction," she recalled.²¹

The next ten years ushered in the most concentrated and productive civil rights activity. The black freedom struggle during this period was so monumental that

¹⁹ Baker, "Invisible," 97–8; Lincoln and Eleanor interview, TP, ACASU; Emily Ragsdale interview, TP, ACASU; William Dickey interview, TP, ACASU.

²⁰ *Arizona Sun* (Phoenix), 13 February 1953, 1 December 1960; Hayzel B. Daniels, "A Black Magistrate's Struggle," in *Arizona Memories*, ed. Anne Hodges Morgan and Rennard Strickland (Tucson, 1984), 335–8; Mary Melcher, "Blacks and Whites Together," 195–216; Luckingham, *Minorities in Phoenix*, 161–2; Mahoney interview, TP, AHFASU; Lincoln and Eleanor interview, TP, ACASU; Lincoln Ragsdale interview by Mary Melcher, TP, AHFASU; Eleanor Ragsdale interview, TP, AHFASU; Greater Phoenix Council for Civic Unity, *To Secure These Rights*, 9–13, 17–46; Harris, *The First 100 Years*, 69–74, 81–98, 138–41; Luckingham, *Minorities in Phoenix*, 161–2.

²¹ Fred Struckmeyer quoted in the *Arizona Sun*, 13 February 1953; Daniels, "A Black Magistrate's Struggle," 335–8; Luckingham, *Minorities in Phoenix*, 161–2.

historian Manning Marable dubbed it America's "Second Reconstruction."²² Historic events from the *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* ruling and the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955–1956, to the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, forever altered the ways in which Americans viewed race and democracy. During this period, many African Americans adopted more militant techniques in their battle for equal rights. By 1954, in Phoenix, unlike the South, racial segregation in education was no longer a clear target for activists. Nevertheless, black Phoenicians, like their southern counterparts, continued to encounter discrimination in housing, places of public accommodation, and employment. The Ragsdales shifted their focus to eliminating discrimination in these areas. They shored-up their interracial support base, organized, and continued to fight. In doing so, they added to their earlier victories by taking on leading roles in desegregating Phoenix's neighborhoods, work force, and service industry.²³ Between 1954 and 1960, Lincoln and Eleanor worked diligently with black businesses, churches, and national political leaders to address the socioeconomic needs of black Phoenicians.²⁴ During this period, Lincoln became more vocal. Increasingly, he called upon black people to be active and committed.

By 1960, de facto segregation emerged as one of the primary obstacles to black progress in the wake of *Brown*, and Phoenix was no exception. That year, the black Phoenician population reached 20,919, up from 4,263 in 1940. The Phoenix Urban League reported that at least 95 percent of black Phoenicians continued to live south of Van Buren Street in the "worst housing areas in the city." "Of the 21,000 Negroes in Phoenix," the organization wrote, "19,000 live in 9 of the city's 92 census tracts, with 7 of these south of the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks. Three of these seven tracts contain roughly one-half of the city's Negro population." The Ragsdales were among a handful of wealthy black families who managed to secure housing in north Phoenix. In 1960, a Phoenician resident noted that in South Phoenix "in almost every instance in education, employment, and housing, the minority-group members are suffering some degree of deprivation, not necessarily civil rights deprivation, but less schooling, less employment, and more crowded housing." The effect of these substandard schools, unskilled low-paying jobs, and discriminatory real estate patterns, led to black isolation and poverty.²⁵

²² See Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945–1990* (Jackson, MS, 1991).

²³ Daniels, "A Black Magistrate's Struggle," 337–8; Melcher, "Blacks and Whites Together," 201; Luckingham, *Minorities in Phoenix*, 161–2; GPCCU, *To Secure These Rights*, 6; Steven F. Lawson and Charles Payne, *Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945–1968* (New York, 1998), 12.

²⁴ Luckingham, *Minorities in Phoenix*, 166.

²⁵ *Phoenix Gazette*, 1 December 1960; *Hearings*, 16–26, 34–68, 101–39; Harris, *The First 100 Years*, 69–74, 81–98, 138–41; Clyde Webb, quoted in Luckingham, *Minorities in Phoenix*, 166.



Christmas at the Ragsdale home at 1606 W. Thomas Road in Phoenix, 1959. *From left to right:* Lincoln Johnson Ragsdale, Jr., Dr. Lincoln Johnson Ragsdale, Sr., Emily Yvonne Ragsdale, Eleanor Dickey Ragsdale, Gwendolyn Onlia Ragsdale, and Elizabeth Estelle Ragsdale. Courtesy of Lincoln J. Ragsdale, Jr.

By 1960, Lincoln Ragsdale joined with Reverend George B. Brooks, leader of the Southminster Presbyterian Church, to battle informal racial segregation and black socioeconomic isolation and poverty. The leaders forged one of the most colorful and effective tandems during the Civil Rights Era. By 1960, Lincoln had become vice-president of the Maricopa County, Arizona, branch of the NAACP. Brooks was its president. Like their southern counterparts who began “sitting-in” in 1960, the two leaders would eventually attack segregation in places of public accommodation. First, however, the two canvassed Phoenician neighborhoods in an effort to integrate the city’s labor force. Ragsdale and Brooks, representing the local chapter of the NAACP, were able to make good use of community resources and obtain some socioeconomic concessions.²⁶

Striving “to move into every aspect of economic life” in Phoenix, the two leaders targeted the powerful Valley National Bank, now Bank One of Arizona, for protest. “We had to pick out someplace to start the fight,” said Ragsdale, “so you had to figure out who you [would] knock off first, the king or the subjects? We figured it was best to start at the top.” During the fall of 1962, the fiery Ragsdale and the devout Brooks

²⁶ Baker, “Invisible,” 98; Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA, 1995), 9–18.

scheduled a meeting with Jim Patrick, president of Valley National Bank. Like other banks, Valley National had no black tellers. At that meeting, the two leaders demanded that the bank cease its discriminatory practices and hire qualified African Americans for something other than unskilled positions. Patrick and the bank's officials refused. Ragsdale and Brooks devised an alternative plan and scheduled another meeting. Brooks remembered the meeting well: "Lincoln was brash, nasty . . . he would back him [Patrick] up into a corner and I was the good guy. I would pull him out. Then he would get belligerent again, and Lincoln would back him up again, and I would pull him out . . . that's what you call creative conflict. We didn't know it, but that's what we did." Brooks wrote that Patrick would say something like, "What can I do for you people?" That is when Ragsdale tried to scare Patrick. He ranted and raved, and at one point he pounded Patrick's desk with his fist in anger. "I remember hitting [Patrick's] desk so hard I thought I heard it crack," recalled Ragsdale. Brooks reports that Ragsdale would say something like "you know goddamn well what we want," while turning to him (Brooks) and complaining loudly that Patrick was "a bigot, a Hitler, a hater." Brooks said he would then ask Ragsdale to leave and cool down, while he would continue from a considerably stronger position.²⁷

When "creative conflict" failed, Ragsdale returned to his naked aggression during the meeting. Forceful and resolute, Lincoln threatened to chain himself and the other protestors to the bank, and bring five hundred people to the institution in a mass protest. Protesters had already formed long lines at the bank windows. Others clogged up lines in the bank "requesting seventy-five pennies as partial change for a dollar" while singing "We Shall Overcome." Nevertheless, Brooks thought to himself "Oh my God, where are we going to get five hundred people?" Ragsdale's threats, coupled with the protesting that was being waged in the lobby of the bank and on the street, was more than Patrick was prepared to endure. "Patrick," said Brooks, would "just be livid." The strategy worked, and a mass protest involving five hundred people was not necessary. "It worked," argued Ragsdale, because "white people weren't used to belligerent Negroes." Soon after this meeting, Patrick integrated the Valley National Bank, hiring Wilbur Hankins as the institution's first African American teller in 1962. Ragsdale and Brooks squared off with many employers, imploring them to hire African Americans. Not every company proved to be as easy to convince as the Valley National Bank. Phoenix's technology giant, Motorola, was steadfast in its refusal to hire black people. Motorola operated three major plants in the city and employed thousands of white Phoenicians. The company's refusal to hire black Phoenicians constituted a major barrier to black advancement in a city that was becoming increasingly dependent on a technology-driven economy.²⁸

²⁷ Baker, "Invisible," 98.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

On 3 February 1962, some of Phoenix's leading activists, including Ragsdale and Brooks, testified before the United States Commission on Civil Rights in downtown Phoenix on de facto segregation and racial discrimination in the city. The commission was created in 1957 by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, and chaired by John A. Hannah, president of Michigan State University. The commission "served as a civil rights watchdog, with no real enforcement powers, but with considerable influence on public opinion." Brooks's testimony was direct. He announced that "the greatest problem facing the Negro in Phoenix is that of employment discrimination." Few blacks were employed in non-menial capacities. This employment discrimination, Brooks believed, was "a clear violation of Arizona State Law," and the Fourteenth Amendment.²⁹

When Ragsdale took the floor to address the commission, he was intense and articulate:

With regard to housing, the significant thing to point out is that 90 percent of all the Negroes living in Phoenix live south of Van Buren Street. It is also important to note that 97 percent of all Negroes live within a radius of one mile of the railroad tracks or the riverbed. Lets take one report, census track 105. We have 4,000 Negroes that live in this area. 73 percent of these units are substandard, 34 percent of them are dilapidated; unfit for human occupancy. What has our industry done about housing for Negroes? Lets look at it. 31, 000 new homes have been built by three builders in the North East Section of Phoenix, and the North West Section of Phoenix. Not one of these new houses, not one, has been sold to a Negro when it was new. Not one!³⁰

While activists took their concerns to the federal government, Lincoln Ragsdale continued to square off as the "bad guy" in negotiations with white leaders. He, with the help of Brooks and other leaders, decided to assault the discriminatory practices of Motorola and other large companies such as Sperry Rand and General Electric. In their estimation, job discrimination was more damaging to minorities than segregation. "How can you go into places to eat or sleep when you don't have any money?" Ragsdale asked. As early as 1960, Ragsdale, Brooks, and other NAACP leaders started taking carloads of people to Phoenician employers to apply for jobs. To demon-

²⁹ *Hearings*, 16–26, 34–68, 101–39; Matthew C. Whitaker, "Michigan Commission on Civil Rights," in *Organizing Black America: An Encyclopedia of African American Associations*, ed. Nina Mjagkij (New York, 2000), 331–2.

³⁰ KSC Management Corporation, The Phoenix Urban League, and the United States Commission on Civil Rights, *The Search* (Phoenix, 1962) (video recording of the hearing before the Commission on Civil Rights, copy in author's possession); *Hearings before the United States Commission on Civil Rights, Phoenix, Arizona, 3 February 1962* (Washington, DC, 1962), 16–26.

strate their resolve, hundreds applied. Hundreds were rejected. Many employers “were cordial but firm,” Brooks remembered. “They told us, ‘We are not going to hire any black folks here. We must give these jobs to parents of white engineers we want to recruit.’”³¹

Ragsdale and Brooks were incensed. They immediately marshaled their resources to stage an all-out assault on Motorola’s practices. The two leaders met assertive resistance from Motorola executives as well.³² It was not until Brooks was slipped a memo from the Maricopa County Welfare Department in 1962 that the leaders acquired the smoking gun they needed. The memo noted that a large electronics firm was looking for “a young woman on welfare, eighteen years of age, with a high school diploma, who must be white.” Rumors had already been circulating throughout the black community that the Welfare Department was practicing blatant discrimination. Until the NAACP secured the memo, however, the rumors could not be substantiated.³³

Brooks and Herbert Ely investigated the matter further and determined that the NAACP had found a verifiable case of racial discrimination. The state-run employment office was, in fact, conspiring with private industry to deny black Phoenicians employment. Brooks, Ely, the Ragsdales, and the NAACP, called for a meeting with State Attorney General Robert Pickrell, and secured the full attention of the Phoenician media. At the meeting, Brooks accused the welfare department of “being in collusion with firms to deny black people jobs.” “I was good that day,” Brooks reminisced, “I got quoted.” The publicity resulted in Motorola’s capitulation. Soon it hired its first African American employee on the manufacturing line.³⁴

Ragsdale’s and Brooks’s tag team efforts worked enough to open the minds, if not the wallets, of a few business owners, and it earned the two leaders, and the NAACP, respect from progressive Phoenicians—and contempt from many white people. Improvement in the overall condition of the black community was limited, however. Most white leaders encouraged private industry, rather than government, to assist struggling minority communities. Adequate support was not forthcoming from either. With a poor economic base, black Phoenician communities continued to suffer. While activists began to make inroads in employment, many began to set their sights on eradicating segregation in public facilities. Historian Mary Melcher writes that Barbara Callahan, of Phoenix’s Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, organized a number of sit-ins during the summer of 1960 through its Youth Council. The protestors were inspired to act by black students at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical

³¹ Lincoln Ragsdale interview, TP, AHFASU; George Brooks, interview by Mary Melcher, 31 January 1990, Phoenix, Arizona, TP, AHFASU.

³² *Arizona Sun*, 6 April 1961; Travis Williams, interview by Matthew C. Whitaker, 6 April 2000, Phoenix, Arizona, TP, ACASU.

³³ *Arizona Sun*, 19 April 1962; Melcher, “Blacks and Whites Together,” 206; George Brooks, interview by Mary Melcher, TP AHFASU.

³⁴ Melcher, “Blacks and Whites Together,” 206.

College who, on 1 February 1960, ignited the national "sit-in" movement at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. The NAACP also participated in the demonstrations at Phoenician businesses. Inspired by the events taking place in the South, young black Phoenicians followed their southern counterparts lead, and staged sit-ins at lunch counters throughout Phoenix. Many businesses did not resist. They no doubt wanted to avoid the sort of mass white hysteria that had overtaken many southern cities. On the other hand, some businesses flatly refused to serve African Americans.³⁵

Lincoln Ragsdale stated that many of Phoenix's white restaurateurs would not even allow blacks to enter through the back of their establishments to eat or to use the bathroom. "The only bathrooms you could use downtown were [in] Phoenix City Hall, the bus station, the train station and the County Building," he recalled.³⁶ Clovis Campbell, Sr., an understudy of Lincoln Ragsdale, and the first African American to be elected to the Arizona State Senate, was much more indignant in his recollections. African Americans were frequently greeted by signs in local eateries proclaiming the "right to refuse anybody service," Campbell recalled. "Well, you know what that meant," Campbell exclaimed: "nigga don't come in here."³⁷

William Dickey, Eleanor Ragsdale's younger brother, stated that two businesses were especially meanspirited to black people. The Citrus Drugstore located at Sixteenth and Van Buren streets refused to serve blacks, and its owner, one of the most stubborn and antagonistic white proprietors in the city, often chased groups of Phoenician sit-in protestors away while bellowing racial epitaphs and issuing threats of violence. Rather than succumb to media and activist pressure to desegregate his lunch counter, the owner removed the stools altogether. At the Woolworth store in downtown Phoenix, Dickey recalled, "you couldn't sit at the counter and have a Coke." The NAACP in Phoenix went on the offensive. Led by Eleanor and Lincoln Ragsdale on 27 January 1962, over one hundred black Phoenicians concerned with "the sad and deprived economic state of themselves and their people," marched in protest to Woolworth's discriminatory practices. According to an NAACP spokesman, "they were protesting the previously stated and definitely applied policy of Negro discrimination in clerical and sales capacities in the Woolworth Stores in the Phoenix area." Up to that point, according to the NAACP, no black person had ever been "hired to sell goods at Woolworth stores or any of the other downtown 5 and 10 cents chain stores." NAACP leaders proclaimed that they had undertaken "this method to abolish job discrimination" and would continue to "fight until the walls of discrimination in job opportunities came tumbling down."³⁸

³⁵ George Brooks, interview by Mary Melcher, TP AHFASU; Harris, *The First 100 Years*, 69–74; Melcher, "Blacks and Whites Together," 195–216; Luckingham, *Minorities in Phoenix*, 167; Carson, *In Struggle*, 9–18; Melcher, "Blacks and Whites Together," 206.

³⁶ Irene McClellan King, interview by Maria Hernandez, Summer 1981, Phoenix, Arizona, TP ACASU; Baker, "Invisible," 98.

³⁷ Lincoln and Eleanor, interview, TP, ACASU.

³⁸ *Arizona Sun*, 1 February 1962.

Later that year, Eleanor took a leading role in calling for legislation that would make racial discrimination in places of public accommodation illegal. The fight for a public accommodations bill in Phoenix would emerge as a defining moment in the Phoenician movement and for Eleanor Ragsdale. She became more outspoken, marched often, wrote to and met with law makers, and continued to raise money through churches and women's associations to underwrite the activities of the NAACP, PUL, and GPCCU. One of Eleanor Ragsdale's most disturbing memories during this period, however, was of picketing at the state capitol in 1962 to call attention to the need for a public accommodations bill. "It was the first time in my life that I had been spat upon and called ugly names," she remembered. "There were people standing on the sidelines jeering. Because my skin is fair, they called me 'White folks' nigger.' They thought I was white, and they were wondering what I was doing standing in a picket line trying to help black people."³⁹

Establishments owned by white Phoenicians were not the only ones that refused to service black patrons. There were also several Mexican American restaurants that would not serve blacks, Dickey remembered. El Rey Café on South Central Avenue was one of them. Fair skinned and green-eyed, Dickey, like his sister, could have passed for white or Latino if he chose to do so. He did not. Nevertheless, he did make use of his appearance to silently subvert the prevailing racial ethos. While picketing the El Rey Café for its discriminatory practices, Dickey and a Latino friend decided to "sneak in" to grab a bite to eat. "Well, they didn't realize that I was black," Dickey recalled, "so we went in and sat down to have lunch." It was not long before the owner of the restaurant knew something was awry, because all of Dickey's fellow marchers started smiling and waving at him and his friend through the restaurant window. Once the proprietor was tipped-off to Dickey being an African American, he decided to escort him and his friend out of the eatery and to close down for lunch.⁴⁰

The relationship between African Americans and Mexican Americans in Phoenix has a long history. The two groups have resided in the city since its birth. Both have been instrumental in the development of Phoenix. Each group, however, was subjected to the racism of Phoenix's ruling white elite. Like black Phoenicians, Mexican American workers were exploited, underpaid, and restricted to the most menial labor. Unlike African Americans, however, Mexican Americans with fair skin and European features were often deemed white by the dominant society. This racial dynamic afforded some Mexican Americans more socioeconomic mobility than their black counterparts.⁴¹

³⁹ Lincoln and Eleanor interview, TP, ACASU.

⁴⁰ Luckingham, *Minorities in Phoenix*, 177; William Dickey interview, TP, ACASU.

⁴¹ Francisco A. Rosales, *Chicano!: The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement* (Houston, 1996), 1–52; *Weekly Arizona Minor* (Prescott), 13 May 1871; *Phoenix Herald*, 17 August 1883; *Phoenix Daily Herald*, 8 May 1896; *Weekly Arizona Minor*, 13 April 1872; *Territorial Expositor*, 25 June 1880; Federal manuscript census schedule, Arizona Territory, 1870, 1880,

The founders and early boosters of Phoenix were former southerners and embraced many of the anti-black attitudes that dominated race relations in the South. To them, African Americans represented the antithesis of whiteness, while Mexican Americans, although they were deemed subordinate and inferior, were also viewed as partially European. Some Mexican Americans thought of themselves as, and were viewed as, a white ethnic group, much like the Irish or the Italians. The fact that some Mexican Americans considered themselves to be a kind of white ethnic group caused tension between blacks and Mexican American Phoenicians throughout the twentieth century. Moreover, in order to prosper politically and economically, some Mexican American business leaders adopted some of the city's prevailing racial customs.⁴²

The fact that Mexican American restaurants often refused to serve blacks underscores the link between capitalism, economic competition, assimilation, white supremacy, and racial discrimination. As long as such restaurants were serving other Mexicans, Ragsdale stated, there was usually "no problem." When white people came to eat at some of these restaurants, however, the owners were afraid that the presence of black patrons would scare off the majority of their business: white people. Moreover, white people "would threaten the owners," Ragsdale maintained. "We won't come back if you serve these niggers," they would say. Mexican American restaurateurs did not appear to harbor any deep-seated racial animosity toward black people, or the kind of "negrophobia" that many whites did. Their decision to deny blacks access to their establishments seemed to have been inspired primarily by their desire to maintain a profitable business. Given the demographics of the city, Mexican American restaurants could ill afford to estrange white Phoenicians, who constituted the overwhelming majority of the city's residents. To remain competitive and profitable, some Mexican restaurateurs would adopt the prevailing racial mores and customs of their white clientele when white Phoenicians dined at their establishments. Nevertheless, when whites were absent from restaurants operated by some Mexican Americans, Ragsdale suggested, African Americans were treated fairly.⁴³

Often activists were isolated, threatened, and physically terrorized. The *Arizona Sun* (Phoenix) in 1962, in fact, expressed its belief that "if anyone doubts that there is discrimination against Negroes in Phoenix, he must be deaf, dumb, and blind." As journalist Lori Baker posits, the backlash against Lincoln Ragsdale's civil rights activities intensified as his profile and fortune grew. For example, by 1962 the Federal Bureau of Investigation had "warned him that the Minutemen, a self-named 'patriotic

Government Documents, Hayden Library, Arizona State University; Robert Nimmons, "Arizona's Forgotten Past: The Negro in Arizona, 1539-1965" (master's thesis, Northern Arizona University, 1971), 92-3; Federal manuscript census schedule, 1940; Luckingham, *Phoenix*, 2-39.

⁴² Rosales, *Chicano!*, 1-52.

⁴³ Lincoln and Eleanor, interview, TP, ACASU; Luckingham, *Minorities in Phoenix*, 167. According to the 1960 U.S. Census of Population, there were 356,791 whites, 61,460 Mexican Americans, and 20,919 African Americans in Phoenix.

party,' were plotting his assassination." An FBI agent "advised him to carry a gun with him at all times." Ragsdale did not reduce his activities. He remained unmoved by the threats against his life. "I was young, and I didn't have as much fear," he recalled. Ragsdale was an "antagonist who never hesitated to become brash or confrontational with white leaders" who treated blacks unfairly. This made him an enemy to many white Phoenicians. In addition to white hatred, Ragsdale faced black animosity as well. Some in the black community feared white retaliation in response to Lincoln's bold activism. Some believed that Lincoln's confrontational character might cause the black Phoenicians more harm than good. Their fears were in many ways justified. Many southern black leaders were lynched for exhibiting behavior far less confrontational than Ragsdale's. In fact, Lincoln Ragsdale's aggressive methods for demonstrating his "manhood," were indicative of a type of masculinity that blacks in the South, with its history of violence and terrorism, could rarely display. Ragsdale, perhaps better than most blacks, understood that the West's more fluid race relations created a vacuum for a more brash and enterprising black leadership. His ability to be more audacious in his activism, without the threat of mass acts of violent retribution against the black community, gave him freedom to resist and galvanize in ways that were perhaps uniquely western.⁴⁴

As in the national Civil Rights movement, the tension between gradualist and more aggressive leaders posed a challenge to Phoenician activists like the Ragsdales. As Mary Melcher has indicated, Phoenix "mirrored the nation at large in the sense that the NAACP pursued a more confrontational approach than did the Urban League." Activist, artist, and professor Eugene Grigsby concurred, stating that although the NAACP and the Urban League worked together to end discrimination, the NAACP was actually the "pusher" and the "firebrand." Using different language, George Brooks likened the NAACP to "the War Department," and the Urban League to "the State Department." The NAACP did the "dirty work," and the Urban League, according to Melcher, "cleaned up the mess." As the NAACP and the Urban League fought against employment discrimination and segregated facilities, the GPCCU worked to establish a city commission, much like the national Civil Rights Commission, to monitor and contest racial discrimination in the city.⁴⁵ After having their pleas fall upon deaf ears for almost two years, the Phoenix City Council finally surrendered to the mounting pressure of the Ragsdales and their fellow activists. The council created the Phoenix

⁴⁴ Earnestine Jenkins and Darlene Clark Hine, eds., *Question of Manhood: A Reader in U. S. Black Men's History and Masculinity, Volume 2, The 19th Century: From Emancipation to Jim Crow* (Bloomington, IN, 2001), xi–xvii; Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896–1920* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1996), 61–90; *Arizona Sun*, 1 February and 19 July 1962; Baker, "Invisible," 98.

⁴⁵ Melcher, "Black and Whites Together," 207; George Brooks, interview by Mary Melcher, TP AHFASU; Thomasena Grigsby, interview by Mary Melcher, 7 February 1990, Phoenix, Arizona, TP, AHFASU; Eugene Grigsby, interview by Mary Melcher, 12 February 1990, Phoenix, Arizona, TP, AHFASU; Taylor, *In Search of a Racial Frontier*, 278–99.

Human Relations Commission on 2 July 1963—one month before Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

Fran Waldman, a dedicated Jewish activist and original member of the Human Relations Commission, remembered that the assembly investigated a number of complaints alleging racial discrimination during its first year in existence. The body had no power to force local businesses, or anyone, to integrate. The commission learned quickly that they could not rely on pressure or compassion. The Ragsdales and other leaders called for a public accommodation law banning racial segregation in Phoenician businesses. This was not the first time activists had tried to implement such civil rights legislation. Their previous efforts had been met with a fire storm of opposition. The local white press supported this resistance. The *Arizona Republic* (Phoenix) argued that "the way to the abolition of discriminating practices is not through law." Phoenix's ruling white administrators rejected nondiscriminatory measures every time they were proposed. In 1961, an editor for the *Arizona Republic* railed against civil rights legislation. "If there is a state in the union that doesn't need civil rights legislation," he wrote, "it is Arizona."⁴⁶

Ragsdale, frustrated and angry after being routinely barred from white establishments, and having few entertainment options, decided in 1962 to add nightclub owner and restaurateur to his expanding endeavors. Bill Dickey, Ragsdale's brother-in-law, remembered he and Lincoln wanting to provide somewhere for "professional black people" to socialize and have cocktails and something to eat, since they were barred from white-owned places of public accommodation. Although he believed that protesting racial discrimination would eventually open up more opportunities for blacks, he also believed that black people should create and maintain their own institutions to sustain and move black communities forward. When Ragsdale was moved to open his own club, Dickey remembers that black social institutions in Phoenix were limited to "maybe the [American] Legion, the Elks Club, or some of those V.F.W. places." Ragsdale's and Dickey's associates, including the hand-full of black doctors, business owners, and teachers in "the Valley," originally conceived of the "Skyroom" as a private club. Despite their desire to establish what would have amounted to an elite club of well-to-do black people, their plans evolved along a different trajectory.⁴⁷

Ragsdale wanted to "send out applications asking people to join [the] private club," Dickey recalled. "This would be their place," Ragsdale announced. Lincoln and his partners decided to "ask for three hundred dollars for a joining fee, and two dollars a month for dues." Dickey remembered mailing "something like one hundred and fifty applications to all the professional [black] people and so forth in town." With

⁴⁶ Fran Waldman interview, in Human Rights Commission, *First Annual Report, 1963–1964* (Phoenix, 1964), 2–6; *Arizona Sun*, 17 May 1946, 14 November 1947, 10 October 1952, 19 April and 7 December 1956, 29 January and 1 September 1960, 9 March and 6 April 1961.

⁴⁷ *Arizona Sun*, 12 July 1962 and 17 January 1963; William Dickey interview, TP, ACASU.

amusement, Dickey recalled, "We only got two back." "The brothers and sisters want some place to go," he mused, "but they don't want to spend no money." Dickey believed that the chilly response may have been linked to jealousy or class divisions within the black community. "A lot of people said, well, [Ragsdale's] just trying to use us to get a club." Some black Phoenicians probably believed that as Lincoln's power and influence in the community expanded, so too did the gap between his concurrent allegiance to civil rights and capitalism. Some may have wondered how he, as a leader of a primarily poor people, could open a club that would, by virtue of its monetary requirements, exclude the masses of them. Many believed that he truly relished working for the advancement of the black community, but some began to believe that he did not see himself as being of the black community.⁴⁸

Despite the cold response to his membership application drive and his critics, Lincoln decided to proceed with his plans. On 8 July 1962, Ragsdale, with the help of Dickey, opened the doors of the Century Skyroom Restaurant and Social Club to the public. The club was located on the second floor of the Ragsdale Valley Life Insurance Building at 1140 East Washington Street. Century Skyroom was soon known for its "fine restaurant and cocktail lounge, beautiful atmosphere, and lunch and evening dining." The Century Skyroom hosted celebrated entertainers like Duke Ellington, and before long it was regarded as "one of the top jazz clubs in the country."⁴⁹

Although Ragsdale seemed to be extending himself in every possible direction, he and his fellow activists continued to push for a public accommodations law in Phoenix throughout the spring of 1964. After some political maneuvering by the Human Relations Commission, several high profile and confrontational protests at the Arizona State Capitol building, and some heated debates between the NAACP (represented by Ragsdale and Brooks) and the city council (supported by Governor Paul Fannin), the city council finally relented on 16 July 1964, enacting a Public Accommodations Law in Phoenix. The law made it illegal to "discriminate in places of public accommodation against any person because of race, creed, national origin, or ancestry." The Human Relations Commission created a Public Accommodations Committee to supervise the implementation of the law. Phoenix's new ordinance came on the heels of the national Civil Rights Act passed on 2 July 1964. One year later, Arizona passed a statewide civil rights law, which banned discrimination in housing, employment, voting, and public accommodations. Phoenix, like many states elsewhere in the nation, made critical advancements in civil rights, despite the relatively small number of black people in the city.⁵⁰

In addition to fighting for the desegregation of places of public accommodation, Lincoln Ragsdale decided to confront the absence of minorities in city government.

⁴⁸ William Dickey interview, TP, ACASU.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Fran Waldman interview; Harris, *The First 100 Years*, 95–115.

"Prior to the mid-1960s," Mary Melcher argues, "the Charter Government Committee (CGC) held a tight grip on Phoenix city elections." The CGC was formed in 1949 and was supported by white Phoenician power brokers like Eugene Pulliam and businessman and would-be political legend Barry Goldwater. The CGC, with its deep pockets and extensive networks, continually persuaded Phoenicians to support its slate in selecting candidates for mayor and city council through the 1950s. Ragsdale criticized the CGC, arguing that it catered to well-to-do whites. The fact that Ragsdale had recently entertained the idea of creating a supper club that would cater specifically to professional black people, made this criticism ironic. Unlike the CGC, however, Ragsdale, in his role as activist, did address the needs of poor black people. He may not have been inclined to socialize with poor African Americans, but unlike most members of the CGC, he was willing to speak out and act in their defense. Ragsdale's criticism of the CGC was not simple speculation. Practically all CGC candidates were white, conservative, Republican men, who lived in the affluent areas of North Phoenix. In 1963, Lincoln Ragsdale and other members of the GPCCU formed the progressive, community-based Action Citizens Committee (ACT) to challenge the CGC.⁵¹ The ACT campaign operated independently of the GPCCU and offered an interracial roster of candidates for city council that included Ragsdale, business leaders Robert L. Aden, Ed Korrick, and Manuel Pena, U. S. Congressman from Arizona Richard F. Harless, and teachers Madelene Van Arsdell and Charles J. Farrell. The slate ran on a platform that called attention to discrimination, political elitism, crime, political favoritism, corruption, and the city's poor infrastructure. Herbert Ely, the campaign manager and legal advisor, remembers the ACT Committee "taking on the City of Phoenix against hostile forces." The "business community and the [*Arizona Republic*] newspaper were absolutely opposed to the notion of taking on the then establishment, which included the progeny of Barry Goldwater."⁵²

"Our leading candidate was Lincoln Ragsdale," Ely maintained. "He wasn't the leading vote getter, and leading is probably poor nomenclature, but [he was] the most significant candidate." Ely and activist Fran Waldman believed Lincoln was instrumental because of the long term implications of his candidacy. Lincoln called attention to the fact that minorities were not represented on the city council. As one eyewitness noted, "the only areas being developed are the ones where councilmen are interested. Look south of the tracks. Nothing is being done there." Black Phoenicians and residents of South Phoenix were not represented on the city council. Ragsdale's

⁵¹ Action Citizens Committee Paid Political Advertisement (campaign newsletter), "ACT Slate Takes Lead in Election Campaign," (Phoenix, 1963) in author's possession; Luckingham, *Phoenix*, 150–3; Herbert Ely, interview by Matthew C. Whitaker, 17 July 2000, TP, ACASU; Lincoln and Eleanor interview, TP, ACASU; Melcher, "Blacks and Whites Together," 209.

⁵² *Arizona Republic*, 28 February 1993; Luckingham, *Phoenix*, 179; Melcher, "Blacks and Whites Together," 209; Herbert Ely interview.



The Actions Citizens Committee (“ACT”) Phoenix City Council Slate, 1963. *Standing from left to right:* Manuel Pena, Ed Korrick, and Robert L. Alden. *Seated from left to right:* Charles J. Farrell, Madelene Van Arsdell, and Lincoln J. Ragsdale, Sr. Courtesy of Lincoln J. Ragsdale, Jr.

bid for a city council seat was an attempt to change that. “We didn’t win,” Waldman acknowledged, “but we did shake up city hall!” “We rallied this community like it had never been rallied before,” Ragsdale maintained. He remembered registering “more African Americans and Mexican Americans [to vote] than ever before.” The ACT Campaign received 49 percent of the vote, and “changed the city forever,” Ely boasted.⁵³

Lincoln Ragsdale’s participation in the ACT campaign also gave rise to increased collaboration between African American and Mexican American leaders. Throughout the campaign, Ragsdale worked closely with Manuel Pena and other members of the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA). Together he and Pena promoted cooperation between the two communities, while calling for increased voter registration and political activism in minority communities.⁵⁴ From 1956 through 1960,

⁵³ *Arizona Republic*, 28 February 1993; Luckingham, *Phoenix*, 179; Melcher, “Blacks and Whites Together,” 209; Herbert Ely interview, TP, ACASU; George Brooks, interview by Matthew C. Whitaker, 6 April 2000, Phoenix, Arizona, TP, ACASU; George Brooks, interview by Mary Melcher, TP, AHFASU; Luckingham, *Minorities in Phoenix*, 169; *Hearings*, 100–39. In 1965, teacher Dr. Morrison Warren was selected by the CGC as the first African American candidate on its slate. Warren won a seat on the Phoenix City Council that year, and was elected to a second term in 1967.

⁵⁴ Luckingham, *Minorities in Phoenix*, 169.

Pena and Ragsdale were members of the Phoenix Urban League. When he and Ragsdale helped launch the ACT campaign, they were both members of the GPCCU. Ragsdale and Pena bemoaned the lack of minority representation on the Phoenix City Council, and both leaders worked to improve educational opportunities for minorities in Phoenix.⁵⁵

Owing, in part, to the leadership of the Ragsdales and their allies, political and economic gains were made in the black community, but they were often mitigated by persistent inequality and problems in housing, employment, education, and health care. The Phoenician movement was relatively swift and successful at forcing the desegregation of area schools and a number of important businesses, without one recorded episode of egregious violence. This distinguished it from many local movements. By 1963, however, Phoenician activists, not unlike their peers in other cities, were faced with the staggering reality that the legacy and preservation of white supremacy, through custom and official doctrine, continued to relegate blacks to the bottom of virtually every major socioeconomic category.⁵⁶

Undaunted, Lincoln Ragsdale continued to organize and square off as the “bad guy” in negotiations with white leaders to produce education and job opportunities for racial minorities in Phoenix. In an effort to maintain the movement’s momentum, expose the unjust treatment of people of color in the “Mississippi of the West,” and place added pressure upon the city’s leadership to ban *de jure* segregation in Phoenix, Ragsdale extended an invitation to Martin Luther King, Jr. to speak about the issue of racism and peaceful protest in Phoenix. King, accepting the invitation from Phoenix’s NAACP branch, visited the valley on 3 June 1964. He extolled the virtues of non-violent action before a crowd of 3,450 people (450 of whom were Kiwanis members) at Goodwin Auditorium on the campus of Arizona State University. During the fleeting moments of his isolated stop, King spoke of brotherhood, asking his audience to continue to struggle for justice and equality so America could “get rid of the last vestiges of segregation.” “[They] throw us in jail . . . bomb our homes . . . threaten our little children,” King cried out, “and as difficult as it is, we will still love [them]. This is the meaning of non-violent action.”⁵⁷

Ragsdale escorted King to his home following the leader’s speech. Eleanor recalled that encounter as an event that changed her life. Eleanor remembered King as a “warm, dedicated man” who radiated distinction. “I brought a great deal of anger and frustration to the Civil Rights movement,” Eleanor admitted. She could not accept “the injustice of the laws that would keep black people in a spiral of perpetual

⁵⁵ Action Citizens Committee Paid Political Advertisement (campaign newsletter), “Pena Supports Opportunity for Underprivileged Youth” (Phoenix, 1963); GPCCU, *To Secure These Rights*, 16; *Hearings*, 100–39.

⁵⁶ *Hearings*, 100–39.

⁵⁷ *Arizona Republic*, 4 June 1964; *Arizona Sun*, 1 and 8 March 1962; Herbert L. Ely in interview, TP, ACASU.

frustration and denigration, and in a system that taught us we weren't worth anything." "It was [King]," she said, "who really taught us the strength to love despite everything." King's visit to the valley had a powerful impact on Lincoln as well. After King's visit to Phoenix, Emily Ragsdale remembered that her father would often listen to "tapes of Martin Luther King's speeches over and over again. [She] realize[d] now, as [she got] older, that he was building his spirit up; giving himself that spiritual lift that he needed."⁵⁸

Not long after King made his speech in Phoenix, de jure segregation became illegal in the city. King's presence, and the spirit and force of the national civil rights establishment that he brought with him, helped dispose of some of the last vestiges of formal racial segregation in the city. Phoenix also benefitted from the passing of the national 1964 Civil Rights Act, and the national 1965 Voting Rights Act.⁵⁹

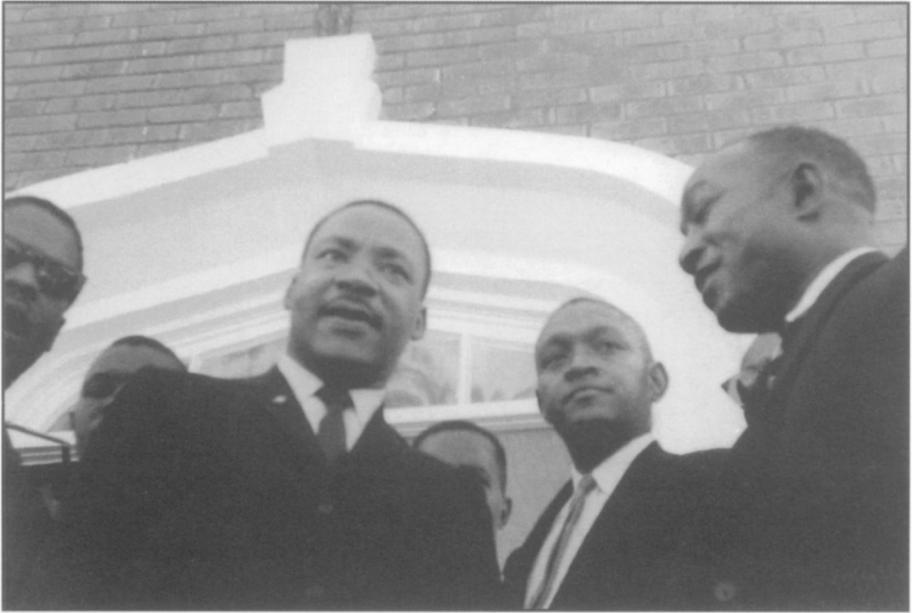
The leadership of the Ragsdales and their allies at the local level helped end formal discrimination in employment, public accommodations, and voting in Phoenix soon after the enactment of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965. The success of the Civil Rights movement, and local leaders like the Ragsdales and their comrades, relied on myriad factors. The federal government played a key role in producing landmark legislation, responding to the demands of protestors, and enforcing the law at critical moments throughout the movement. Black leaders, like the Ragsdales at the local level, and Martin Luther King at the national level, deliberately pursued strategies to provoke confrontations that would ensure government intervention and media coverage. They attacked the towering edifice that was white supremacy and socioeconomic inequality. The determination and the spirit of these leaders, the dedication of their partners, the strength of their organizations, and the support of their constituents, pressured private institutions and governmental leaders, agencies, and courts, to render decisions that systematically desegregated the nation.⁶⁰

Lincoln and Eleanor Ragsdale led the way throughout the peak years of the Civil Rights movement in Phoenix. Their efforts were often met with contempt and hostility. In order to overcome this massive resistance, the Ragsdales were compelled to collaborate with other civil rights activists to devise viable strategies to combat discrimination. As Mary Melcher writes, "[B]y working together, this small band of activists, black, white, Chicano, male, female, broke down the barriers of racial discrimination and profoundly changed the political and social fabric of Phoenix." The ability of Ragsdale's influential group to secure resources and support from a racially diverse group of people made the city's movement unique. Like the Ragsdales, many of

⁵⁸ Baker, "Invisible," 99; Emily Ragsdale interview, TP, ACASU.

⁵⁹ Baker, "Invisible," 99; Emily Ragsdale interview, TP, ACASU; Robert D. Loevy, *To End All Segregation: The Politics and Passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964* (Washington, DC, 1990), 1–35; Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963–65* (New York, 1998), 606–12.

⁶⁰ *Arizona Republic*, 4 June 1964; Baker, "Invisible," 99.



Standing right of center, Lincoln J. Ragsdale, Sr. poses with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Phoenix. King visited "The Valley" on 3 June 1964. Courtesy of Lincoln J. Ragsdale, Jr.

the group, such as Manuel Pena, Fran Waldman, Herbert Ely, and Ed Korrick were business and religious leaders, activists, and professionals. All of them had a passion for justice and believed that racial integration was the best way to secure it. All of them held prominent leadership positions within their own subgroups, while maintaining substantive networks and lines of communication with the city's white elite. These leaders formed a smallish, yet very well connected, outspoken, and influential cluster. Although their subgroups, particularly African Americans, wielded limited institutional and mainstream power, together they constituted an influential block. Moreover, the support of a small number of influential progressive whites, such as Robert L. Alden, Richard Harless, and Madelene Van Arsdell, gave the Phoenician movement an air of legitimacy that it may not have attained had these leaders not supported leaders like the Ragsdales.⁶¹

When rallied, Phoenix's various racial communities were able to push the ruling white elite to alter the way in which it viewed and handled race relations and issues of access and opportunity. Unlike whites in the South, white Phoenicians concerned with maintaining the status quo had to contend with the protests and insurgency of three peoples of color and the progressive activity of a number of local whites as well.

⁶¹ Luckingham, *Minorities in Phoenix*, 205–7; Melcher, "Blacks and Whites Together," 206.



Carrying a sign that reads “Help Phoenix to Help Negro and Mexican Americans Educate Their Children,” a thirteen-year-old Lincoln Ragsdale, Jr. marches with his mother and father for the equal treatment of African Americans and Mexican Americans in Phoenix. Courtesy of Lincoln Ragsdale, Jr.

A thirteen-year-old Lincoln Ragsdale, Jr. underscored this reality when, during the spring of 1963, he marched in protest with his parents while holding a sign that implored local whites to “Help Phoenix to Help Negroes and Mexicans Educate Their Children.” Led by the Ragsdales, movement organizers were compelled to view racial reform holistically, while simultaneously addressing issues that were foundational for various racial and ethnic minorities within the larger movement: desegregation, access to the ballot, anti-semitism, and indigenous sovereignty for example.⁶²

The Ragsdales, through their work in the GPCCU, the NAACP, PUL, and the ACT Campaign, and through intense networking and dialogue, played a critical role in defining an effective Phoenician movement that was both similar to the larger Civil Rights movement and distinct. Lincoln Ragsdale’s bold and confrontational leadership exploited the uniquely fluid racial relations in the West to fashion a career that was both unabashed and creative, when many of his southern contemporaries were under constant threat of terrorism and a more violent version of massive white resistance. Emboldened by a more flexible racial ethos and a more racially diverse population, the Ragsdales and their partners managed to change the law and transform the ways in which black Phoenicians and civil rights were treated. It was a big step from

⁶² Luckingham, *Minorities in Phoenix*, 205–7.

the time when racial injustice was encoded in law and practiced by the majority of the people. The tremendous accomplishments of the Civil Rights movement and leaders like the Ragsdales, however, did not end racial inequality or usher in true socioeconomic integration. The Ragsdales and their fellow insurgents, however, dealt racism and discrimination a serious blow, and in the years that followed, the Ragsdales and their allies continued to fight racial inequality. Although they had ended de jure segregation, they quickly realized that de facto segregation and racial socioeconomic inequality was just as debilitating, and often more difficult to combat.⁶³

Younger, more militant activists soon took center stage in the Civil Right movement and aimed at the economic inequality they believed white supremacy and capitalism had produced. A fracture within the Civil Rights movement ensued, with older, "traditional" Civil Rights leaders often on one side and younger leaders calling for "Black Power" on the other. Despite the antagonisms that emerged during this transition, the Ragsdales continued to fight against racial discrimination and for greater opportunities for African Americans. They worked to produce greater educational, employment, and entrepreneurial opportunities for African Americans. Whenever they discovered a case of de facto segregation, they lent their name, resources, and political influence to activists and organizations that protested it. Lincoln and Eleanor Ragsdale rose to the occasion, and because of their efforts the Valley of the Sun became a much brighter place.

