

very few women ever to initiate a chapter of the Black Panther Party.² Gender barriers in the Black Freedom movement had created difficulties for women leaders in the North, but in the tradition of Southerners Ella Baker and Gloria Richardson, Northern women such as Mary Rem forged their own liberation.³ Second, while a growing body of scholarship exists on the Panther leaders in major urban centers such as the Los Angeles and the Bay Area of California, very little is known about how the Black Panthers developed in America's heartland: Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa.⁴

In Iowa the Des Moines Panthers worked alongside Panther activists in Kansas City and Omaha, Nebraska; in fact, those three chapters worked together so closely that they even rotated members in order to develop Black Panther politics and programs. This chapter seeks to situate the local activities of the Des Moines chapter of the Black Panther Party in a context that connects them to the larger struggle for freedom of Africans and African Americans taking place globally. It reveals that the Black Panther Party was not only national but local, taking on the issues and character of the members in each city. It also suggests that the heartland branches of the Black Panther Party had ideas of their own about women's oppression and women's liberation, about sexual liberation, about issues of drug and alcohol abuse, and about international affairs.

The rise and fall of the Black Panther Party in Des Moines occurred roughly between June 1968 and January 1971. The Iowa chapter emerged during a period of phenomenal growth of the BPP that some scholars have defined as the Black Panther Party's "Revolutionary Nationalist" phase; however, many of the political and ideological conflicts between the Des Moines branch and the national headquarters developed after that early phase as the national party changed its political line to intercommunalism, a fragmentary philosophy espoused by Huey Newton toward the end of his incarceration and subsequent release from prison.

The Des Moines Black Panther Party developed when young activists in the black community decided to organize in response to burning urban issues: unequal educational, school busing, urban renewal, unemployment, and police brutality. The problems of African Americans in Des Moines were longstanding. According to one historian, Victor Cools, traditionally whites and blacks lived in separate worlds in Des Moines. There were three major waves of African American migration to Iowa. First, during World War I the U.S. coal industry imported blacks from several Southern states to break labor strikes in Iowa. Following the war and the Great Migration, African Americans were discriminated against in public accommodations

such as restaurants, hotels, and theaters and were profoundly segregated, in one instance creating a nearly all-black town called Buxton.⁵ A second major migration of African Americans to Iowa took place during the war boom of World War II. Third, the postwar black migration between 1950 and 1960 was by far the largest movement. By the mid-1960s rising discontent over segregation and black urban problems prepared the soil for the birth of the Black Panther Party in Des Moines. Ninety-three percent of the African American population was concentrated in two precincts.⁶ Educationally African American students had lower test scores and graduated at lower rates than white students. In addition to educational problems black residents were concerned about such issues as urban renewal, school busing, unemployment, and police brutality.

Urban renewal became a burning issue when the federal government financed two slum clearance and construction projects in a Des Moines "model cities" area. Those projects threatened black neighborhoods with widespread displacement including areas that were designated for clearance to make way for the construction of a freeway through the inner city. One resident, BPP member Clive De Patton, recalls:

The Blacks; they used to occupy on the west side an area called Center Street. . . . It was very close to downtown so they brought in urban renewal. The people were paying taxes for \$5,000 or \$6,000. Urban renewal came by and said, "We will give you \$4,500 for it." For the people this was more money than they had ever had and they said OK, but when the [officials] came and paid the people, the people got \$2,500 or \$3,000, you know. That was to get the Black people away from downtown. Then to get them further away from downtown they came in with the freeway.

Center Street, the so-called black section of town, was directly impacted by the plan. Center Street was the cultural and small business center of black life in Des Moines until it was eliminated through the "Model Cities" plan.⁷

Rallying young people around such burning issues as urban renewal, a relatively small black population of Des Moines, about twenty thousand, built a BPP chapter with a large membership of about one hundred at its peak.⁸ Despite its relatively large number of cadre, according to Rem, it was more difficult for the police and the FBI to infiltrate the Des Moines BPP because, in such a small community, everyone knew one another.⁹ The rank-and-file membership was especially young, with many of its