

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-EAU CLAIRE

A STORY FROM THE NORTH:  
THE DESEGREGATION OF THE MILWAUKEE SCHOOLS

1963-1977

SUBMITTED TO STEPHEN GOSCH

FOR HIST 489

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

BY

ASHLEY BRETT

EAU CLAIRE, WISCONSIN

APRIL 2007

Copyright for this work is owned by the author. This digital version is published by  
McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin Eau Claire with the consent of the author.

## **Introduction**

There are many words which could be used to describe the sixties. Some of these words include change, the undoing of conformity, radical, separated, and opposition.

The end of the fifties brought along other changes. One major change was seen in the generation gap which had been created by World War II. The earlier generations called WWII the “good war” because it had brought a country together. People who had been children in the fifties, but who were coming of age in the sixties, did not agree that WWII was a “good war”. The “good war” had brought with it The Bomb. Many of these people had nightmares about The Bomb as children and instead of looking towards the future began to worry about whether or not they would make it to the future.

One of the first major changes in the sixties was the assassination of President John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963 in Dallas, Texas. This led to the inauguration of President Lyndon Johnson. This change in presidents would have an affect on many events in the early 1960s.

The 1960s also brought with it the Vietnam War. While WWII had brought the country together, Vietnam was going to rip it apart. Young adults began to protest the draft. They showed their opposition towards the draft by holding “Stop the Draft Week” during the week of October 16, 1967. During this week the young adults protested, had sit-ins, filled the jails, and burned draft cards.

Women also saw a bit of change in the 1960s. They were granted more social freedom than they had been in the past. However, they still had to deal with segregated work places and unequal pay. For example, women were still placed in job placements which were seen as women’s jobs, such at nurses or secretaries. They also lived in a

world of double standards. For example, during Freedom Summer all women had to have parental consent to participate while only men under the age of twenty-one needed permission. It was also looked down upon if a white woman slept with a black man, but it was perfectly okay for a white man to sleep with a black woman.

The 1960s was also a time of civil rights upheaval. Compared to the fifties, the sixties were becoming more radical. The movement itself began to fracture. Groups began to disagree more and more about what they should be fighting for. One of many factors that may have contributed to this was the assassination of President Kennedy. While he was seen as by many civil rights leaders as a champion for their cause, his successor, President Johnson, was seen as a veteran obstructor of the civil rights cause.<sup>1</sup> The civil rights movement was also moving from non-violent to more violent. During the 1960s there was an increased level of race consciousness and frustration. This led to protest demonstrations which then boiled over into rioting. Many people died or were injured in a number of urban race riots.

Although many people do not think of Milwaukee, Wisconsin as an urban center for civil rights, that is exactly what it was in the 1960s. Known to the country as Selma of the North, Milwaukee faced many racial problems. This included segregated housing, employment discrimination, police brutality towards blacks, and substandard and segregated public education. While all of these were major issues, this paper will focus on segregated public education.

Many schools in many states have gone through school desegregation. The beginning of this was in Little Rock, Arkansas. In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled in

---

<sup>1</sup> Lytle, John Hamilton, *America's Uncivil Wars: The Sixties Era from Elvis to the Fall of Richard Nixon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 150.

*Brown vs. Board of Education* that “separate but equal” can not exist in public schooling. Nothing was done about this until 1957 when the Little Rock Nine first attempted to attend a white school. Arkansas’ Governor, Orval Faubus, defied this by ordering the National Guard to stop the students from entering the school. On the third day, President Eisenhower responded by calling in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne to ensure that the students could safely enter the school.

While Little Rock was the first step to school desegregation, the next steps were few and far between. In the first decade after *Brown*’s ruling only 1.17 percent of black students enrolled in school in the eleven states of the Old Confederacy attended school with white students.<sup>2</sup> One of these steps was the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. Included in the bill was Title VI, which permitted but did not require the Federal government to cut off financial assistance in cases of racial discrimination.<sup>3</sup> This had an implication for many schools. Over the next few years, many schools faced the threat of losing their federal funding if they did not comply and desegregate their schools.

The following paper will focus on the desegregation of the Milwaukee public schools. It will begin with a look at Father James Groppi. Groppi was one of the key players in the whole Milwaukee movement. It will look at his up bringing and how he became involved in Milwaukee’s fight for equality.

Next, I will discuss the condition of the schools prior to the desegregation of the school district. This includes a look at the composition of the black population in Milwaukee and Wisconsin, the composition of the school population, and some of the causes of the segregation.

---

<sup>2</sup> Metcalf, George R., *From Little Rock to Boston: The History of School Desegregation* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983), 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

I will then show some of the problems which were caused by the segregation. I will also discuss some of the concerns that the citizens had about both segregation and desegregation. A majority of information for this section was taken from the Lloyd Barbee collection, which is located in the archives at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

The desegregation movement will then be shown. This will begin with the first requests for desegregation in 1963. It will then discuss the participation and actions taken by different organizations, parents, and students. Again the majority of the information will be taken from the Lloyd Barbee collection.

Finally I will discuss the opinions and impacts that the desegregation of the schools had on the people affected the most by the desegregation, the students. The opinions of the students will be looked at by using letters written by students to Father Groppi. These letters are located in the Father James Groppi Papers collection located in the archives at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. The impact on the students will be looked at by using an article by Edgar G. Epps which combines and compares multiple studies into one.

## **Father James Groppi**

James Groppi was born in Bay View, Wisconsin, just south of Milwaukee, on November 16, 1930. He was raised by his parents, who were Italian immigrants, along with eleven other children.<sup>4</sup> The neighborhood that he was raised in was working class and was dominated by Irish and Slavic immigrants. While growing up Groppi felt isolated and was bullied. This gave him the appreciation for being an “outsider” which would get him involved in the civil rights movement as an adult.<sup>5</sup>

Growing up Groppi always felt a pull towards religion. From 1950 to 1952, Groppi attended Mount Calvary Seminary in Mount Calvary, Wisconsin. In 1952 he moved to the St. Francis Seminary in Milwaukee. He remained there until 1959 when he was ordained as a Catholic priest.<sup>6</sup>

It was while he was at St. Francis that he became interested in race relations and the African American community. He spent his last three summers in the seminary working at a camp for urban children, most of whom were poor and black. The community camp was run at Blessed Martin Parish, which was near the Hillside Housing Project in the city’s impoverished North Side. During this time Groppi and the other priests came in direct contact with discrimination and racism. At this point Groppi’s feelings towards discrimination and racism became personal. One of his peers quoted Groppi as saying that, “the face of a young African American girl stung by a racial slur held the pain of Jesus Christ as he hung on the cross.”<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 262.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Archives Department, *Groppi, James, 1930-, Papers, 1964-1978*, (Milwaukee: Archives Department at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee) [database online]; available from ArCat.

<sup>7</sup> Theoharis and Woodard, 262-63.

After Groppi was ordained, he requested to be assigned to an inner-city parish. The archdiocese instead assigned him to St. Veronica Church on the south side of Milwaukee. The parish was made up of mostly working-class, white families. In 1963, there were disagreements between Groppi and the parishioners about the proposal for low-income housing in the area. Groppi was for the open housing movement while the parishioners were not. The archdiocese transferred Groppi to St. Boniface Church, located in the inner city of Milwaukee. The parish was predominately black and was located adjacent to the predominately black North Division High School. St. Boniface would become the home base for the civil rights movement in Milwaukee.<sup>8</sup>

Father Mathew Gottschalk, a Capuchin friar, played a big part in Groppi's involvement in the civil rights movement. In both 1961 and 1963, Gottschalk led a group of young priests, including Groppi, south so that they could be witnesses to racial discrimination. They went to places in both Alabama and Mississippi.<sup>9</sup>

Groppi was also involved in other national parts of the movement. In 1963, Groppi traveled to Washington D.C. to participate in the March on Washington. The next summer Groppi traveled with Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council member Nathan Harwell to Jackson, Mississippi. There they worked with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party on voter registration.

In 1964, school desegregation advocates in Milwaukee formed an umbrella organization to press for change. These advocates were led by the state NAACP chairman, Lloyd Barbee. Their organization was called the Milwaukee United School

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 263.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Integration Committee (MUSIC). In the spring of 1965, Groppi was elected vice chairman.<sup>10</sup>

Another group that Groppi was very involved with was Milwaukee's NAACP Youth Council (YC). In 1963, the group's advisor resigned because their direct action tactics were looked down upon by members of the adult NAACP. As the fight for school desegregation became more heated, the YC began searching for a new advisor. In the spring of 1965, YC members elected Father Groppi as their advisor.<sup>11</sup> Groppi had known many of the members for years because of his community work. This allowed him to be the ideal leader because he could relate too many of their experiences. He had demonstrated more commitment and self sacrifice than any of the African American ministers in the area.

In 1970, Groppi left St. Boniface and moved to St. Michael Church in Milwaukee. The same year he applied, and was accepted, to the Antioch School of Law. In 1972, with only one year of training left, he dropped out. That same year he left St. Michael's. In 1975, Groppi was back in the media spot light as he joined Marlon Brando to mediate the clash between the Menomonee Indians and the Alexian Brothers at the Alexian Monastery in Gresham, Wisconsin.<sup>12</sup>

On April 22, 1976 Groppi married his secretary from St. Boniface, Margaret Rozga. Together they had three children. After considering becoming a Episcopal priest

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 265.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 266.

<sup>12</sup> Groppi, James, 1930-, Papers, 1964-1978, Milwaukee Manuscript Collection EX and Milwaukee Tape 5, Wisconsin Historical Society, Milwaukee Area Research Center, UWM Libraries, University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee.

in Detroit, Michigan, Groppi returned to Milwaukee in the summer of 1979 and became a Milwaukee County transit bus driver. He died on November 4, 1985.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

## **School Composition**

In order to understand the impact that the desegregation would have on the students in Milwaukee it is important to understand the make up of the school district population. This also includes how the Milwaukee population compared to the rest of Wisconsin, so that the importance of Milwaukee in the Civil Rights movement can also be seen. It is also important to understand Milwaukee during this time.

In the 1977 report of *Minority Enrollments in Wisconsin Public School Districts*<sup>14</sup> 436 districts reported information. Of these, sixty-one districts, or fourteen percent, reported having no minorities enrolled in their districts during the 1976-77 school year.<sup>15</sup> Only five districts in the state of Wisconsin reported having over 1000 minority students enrolled. These five school districts were: Beloit, Kenosha, Madison, Milwaukee, and Racine. Milwaukee had the largest minority population with 46,732, followed by Racine with 5, 978. Beloit reported the lowest of the five with 1,435. These five districts alone had seventy-nine point one percent of the total minority population enrollment.<sup>16</sup>

As this evidence shows, the Milwaukee school district by far outnumbered any other district in the state in terms of minority enrollment. This information can be broken down even more to show the number of students from each minority group which were enrolled in the district. For the purpose of this paper, only the information on Blacks, not of Hispanic origin, will be looked at. Of the 46,732 minorities enrolled in the Milwaukee public school district, 40,067 were Black.<sup>17</sup> It was reported that in the state of Wisconsin

---

<sup>14</sup> Department of Public Instruction, *Minority Enrollments in Wisconsin Public School Districts, 1976-77* (Madison, WI: 1977) title page.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 5.

there were 49,147 Black students enrolled in public schools.<sup>18</sup> This meant that approximately eighty-one percent of the Black public school students in Wisconsin were enrolled in the Milwaukee school district that year. That same year there were 185,597 students enrolled in Milwaukee public schools.<sup>19</sup> Black students made-up approximately twenty-one percent of the total school district population. Statewide, the Black public school students only made up three percent of the student population.

This could be attributed to many factors. The main factor to be looked at is the population patterns of Blacks and the state of Wisconsin. According to *Population Notes: Blacks in Wisconsin*, in 1970 the total Black population in Wisconsin was 128,224, while the total state population was 4,417,731.<sup>20</sup> There were many differences between the two populations. The two biggest differences were seen in where they lived and age patterns.

In 1970, ninety-eight and a half percent of the total Black population lived in urban areas compared to only sixty-five point nine percent of the total Wisconsin population. This difference is made even clearer when one looks at the percentages living in the central cities, the urban fringe, and in rural areas. The Black population percentages were ninety-three point six percent in central cities, one point seven percent in the urban fringe or suburbs, and one and a half percent in rural areas. This is compared to the total population of Wisconsin percentages at thirty and a half percent in central cities, sixteen point three percent in the urban fringe or suburbs, and thirty-four point one

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>19</sup> Department of Public Instruction, *1975 thru 1977: School District Census* (Madison, WI: 1977), 20.

<sup>20</sup> Pilar Alicia Parra, *Population Notes: Blacks in Wisconsin* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1989), 3.

percent in rural areas.<sup>21</sup> One can see from this that the majority of the Black population in Wisconsin lived in urban centers, including Milwaukee. In fact, the majority of the urban population in Milwaukee were Black inhabitants.

Another difference between the Black population versus the total population of Wisconsin is in age patterns. This is especially evident in the younger population. Forty point one percent of the Black population was between the ages of zero and fifteen in 1970. The median age in the Black population was nineteen years old. This was much different from the total population of Wisconsin in which only twenty-nine point eight percent of the population was between the ages of zero and fifteen and the median age was twenty-seven years old.<sup>22</sup> What one can infer from this information is that the population of the Black community was much younger than the total state population and therefore had a larger percentage of their population enrolled in school.

School make-up in Milwaukee is also important to look at. The NAACP defined integrated education as a fifteen to forty percent African American student body in each school. Milwaukee was not even close to this type of break down. Experience showed that once a school reached a Negro student body of forty percent it quickly became a segregated school.<sup>23</sup> This meant that once a school began integrating it quickly changed from an all white school to an all black school.

However, the percent of African American students did vary between the schools. In 1963, one high school, two junior highs, and eleven elementary schools had African American student bodies at more than ninety percent. Another four elementary schools

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ronald Venable, Milwaukee, to The Milwaukee Board of School Directors, Milwaukee, 1970, Special Collections, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee.

had African American student bodies between sixty and ninety percent, while two more high schools, one more junior high, and another four elementary schools had African American student bodies of fifty percent and rising.<sup>24</sup> The number of segregated schools continued to increase. MacDowell school was the twenty-ninth Negro school out of the 149 public schools when it opened in 1967.

There were many things which led to the segregation of the Milwaukee public schools. For the most part, the segregation was de facto.<sup>25</sup> The main reason for de facto segregation was housing patterns. As more and more Negroes moved into the core and the northern areas of the city, many whites moved to the southern parts of the city or into the suburbs.

Schools, especially high schools and junior high schools, were also segregated due to districting. Segregation was set up so that Negro elementary schools fed into Negro junior high schools, which then fed into Negro high schools. The same was true for white schools.

Another reason for the segregation of the schools was open enrollment. This was originally put in place to help integrate the schools. The school board saw this as an opportunity for parents to enroll their children in the school of their choice. This backfired. Instead, it gave parents of white students a way to take their children out of an inner core school and put them in a better school. A better school means that the school had more money, more room, and a lower student to teacher ratio.

Segregation was set up in Milwaukee in a way which would make it difficult to integrate. The housing patterns, districting, and open enrollment were just the beginning.

---

<sup>24</sup> Theoharis and Woodard, 264.

<sup>25</sup> Frank A. Aukofer, *City with a Chance* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1968), 50.

Segregation and the desegregation process would cause many problems and difficulties for all involved.

## Segregation

There were many problems which stemmed from the segregation of the schools in Milwaukee. One of the many concerns with the segregation was the students' ability to live and work in a diverse world. Ronald Venable, President of the Student Relations Committee, claimed that separation of races breeds racial myths and results in increasing alienation between the races. He felt that school provided an excellent opportunity for races to learn to live together.<sup>26</sup>

One problem with the segregation was the unequal education between the schools. On March 23, 1964, Civil Rights leaders toured Roosevelt and Wilbur Wright junior high schools. Roosevelt was a predominantly Negro school while Wright was a predominantly white school. What they found were huge inequalities between the two. In particular, these inequalities were seen in the textbooks, classrooms and shop equipment, and in the library. Also found at Roosevelt were paddles which the teachers would use to punish the students. This is only one example of inequality caused by Milwaukee's school segregation.<sup>27</sup>

Busing was another factor which added to the segregation of Milwaukee's schools. Busing first occurred in the Milwaukee public schools for overcrowding in 1952.<sup>28</sup> The bussing was first used to provide relief to Morgandale School, which had become overcrowded. The students were sent to Mitchell School for less than one semester. It was not until the 1957-58 school year that busing became more common.

---

<sup>26</sup> Ronald Venable, Milwaukee, to The Milwaukee Board of School Directors, Milwaukee, 1970, Special Collections, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee.

<sup>27</sup> Unknown, to Dr. James Barrett, Chairman of Special Committee on Milwaukee de facto Segregation, March 12, 1966, Special Collections, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee.

<sup>28</sup> Barbee, Lloyd A., 1925-2002, Papers, 1933-1982, Milwaukee Manuscript Collection 16 and Milwaukee Micro Collection 42, *Busing Policies, I* Wisconsin Historical Society, Milwaukee Area Research Center, UWM Libraries, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

This was the first year of intact busing of Negro children. Intact busing meant that the bused students remained separate from the host students. Students from Lee, Lloyd, and Siefert, all Negro elementary schools, were bused to Jackson. Jackson school was empty and had been turned over to the city. This gave the administration a convenient way to handle the first encounter with a ticklish problem: how to “contain” the Negro children.<sup>29</sup>

Starting in the 1958-59 school year, students from inner core schools began being bused to white schools.<sup>30</sup> However, the inner core students were being kept separate from the students at their receiving schools. They had separate teachers and classrooms.

The segregation created by intact busing was amplified by the fact that until 1963-64 all inner core students were sent home for lunch even when the receiving school had a lunch program. Prior to 1963-64 white students were bused home for lunch only when there was no available lunch program at the receiving school.<sup>31</sup> It changed this year because civil rights criticism of segregation policies began to mount. After these policies changed, all students were given the option of staying for lunch. If there was not a lunch program in place at the receiving school then students were given a cold lunch option. However, many, if not all of the inner core students ate separately from the receiving school children.

There were many people who disagreed with the segregation of bused children. In May, 1965, Lloyd Barbee said that, “students bused for overcrowding must be integrated.”<sup>32</sup> Teachers of the bused students also complained. Some of the concerns that they had were: students lost valuable learning time because they had to use time to be

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>32</sup> *Countdown*, May 1965, Vol. 1, no. 3.

bused, they were harmed psychologically, the bused students are objects of curiosity for the children in the host schools, and they were being denied their constitutional right to free, equal education.<sup>33</sup>

The Washington district is a very important part of the desegregation of the Milwaukee schools. Washington High School was seen as a naturally integrated school. This was because of its feeder schools. Two junior highs which feed into Washington were Steuben and Peckham Junior High Schools.<sup>34</sup> Steuben Junior High was a predominantly white school while Peckham Junior High was a predominantly Negro school. In 1969, Washington was experiencing racial problems. Many people felt that this was because of the segregation of students prior to the high school level. It was proposed that the junior highs be integrated so that the students did not go through culture shock upon entering high school. This would also insure the continued maintenance of the racial mixture of Washington High School.<sup>35</sup>

The natural integration of Washington High School is important to look at. Peckham had not always been a predominantly black school. In 1970, the school had a student population of twenty-five percent black and seventy-five percent white. By 1972, the student population at Peckham had changed dramatically to ninety-six percent black and only four percent white.<sup>36</sup> Because Peckham was a feeder school for Washington High School, it naturally caused some integration. However, the neighborhood had not

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Department of School Administrative Services, *Monthly Enrollment Summary*, March 23, 1973, Special Collections, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee.

<sup>35</sup> Peter H. Mazurek, President Sherman Park Community Association, Milwaukee, to Mr. Thomas Linton, Secretary-Business Manager, Milwaukee, June 4, 1972, Special Collections, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee.

<sup>36</sup> Washington District Community Council Meeting, *Minutes*, November 29, 1972, Special Collections, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee.

changed to match this population make-up. It seems that the integration was caused by white families open-enrolling into other schools.

The Washington district was also threatened by housing patterns. The Sherman Park Community Association (SPCA) wanted to take action to keep the neighborhoods which attended Washington integrated. A memo sent from Marian McEvilly to the president, board, and committee members of the SPCA outlined these goals.<sup>37</sup> One goal was improving the quality of life for all residents. A second goal was to attract both black and white residents. A third and final goal was to reduce the fears of older residents.

The housing patterns also forced the district to consider redistricting. Some of the teachers were concerned that redistricting would, in fact, disrupt to natural school integration. One argument was that since the integration had been healthy and natural that the adjustments, between the different races, had generally been successful. The concern was that by redistricting it would force a new group of students into the school, which would create problems between the students.

Since there were so many different issues with the segregation of the Milwaukee schools, there would be many different approaches to find something that would work. But what would work?

---

<sup>37</sup> Marian McEvilly, SPCA, Milwaukee, to the President, Board, and Committee members of the SPCA, Milwaukee, October 11, 1972, Special Collections, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee.

## **The Movement Towards Desegregation**

Many steps were taken in Milwaukee to achieve school desegregation. The process of desegregation began in the early 1960s. This is when citizens began to voice their opinions and concerns about the school system. Many people were also involved in the movement. Parents, citizens, students, and organizations all took part in this movement.

The key organization in the school desegregation was the Milwaukee United School Integration Committee (MUSIC). Music was an umbrella organization formed by school desegregation advocates in 1964. It was led by the state NAACP chairman, Lloyd Barbee. The main purpose of the organization was to press for change.<sup>38</sup>

In 1964, MUSIC requested that the Milwaukee Board of School Directors adopt a policy recognizing the injustice of segregated, unequal education and to create a plan to realistically correct the problem. The school board refused to consider the request.<sup>39</sup> A year after this request was denied, MUSIC demanded that Superintendent Vincent immediately order the desegregation of bused classes, that the board reconsider the choice of sites for the MacDowell Elementary School and the Francis Parkman Junior High School, and that the Special Committee for Equality of Educational Opportunity be reorganized. This request was made on May 2, 1965. MUSIC gave the school board until May 15<sup>th</sup> to take action.<sup>40</sup> They did not act.

---

<sup>38</sup> Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 264-265).

<sup>39</sup> Lloyd A. Barbee, Chairman, Milwaukee United School Integration Committee, Milwaukee, to Milwaukee Board of School Directors, Milwaukee, May 2, 1965, Special Collections, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

MUSIC tried to reduce the funding given to the school district to get the results that they desired. They figured that if the schools in the inner core were not receiving their fair share of the district funding, then none of the schools should get it. On July 27, 1965, the Executive Board of MUSIC wrote a request to Dr. John W. Gardner, the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare in Washington DC. MUSIC requested that an investigation be conducted in the Milwaukee public schools concerning racial segregation and discrimination being practiced by the Milwaukee school system. Along with this request, MUSIC added that they felt that all federal funding should be withheld from the school system until the investigation was completed.<sup>41</sup>

MUSIC also tried to get the citizens to help in cutting off school funds. A referendum was held on in April, 1966. This referendum asked voters to approve and pay for a building fund increase of twenty-nine million dollars. On March 30, 1966, MUSIC sent a letter to the citizens of Milwaukee asking them to vote against this referendum.<sup>42</sup> When the twenty-nine million dollars was added to the funds already available and previously budgeted it would finance a \$45,745,000 building program from 1966-1970. It is also important to note that only \$8,375,000 was to be used on buildings within the inner core. This included \$6,175,000 for new schools and \$2,200,000 for additions and modernization of existing schools. The twenty-nine million dollars would be used primarily for real estate activities.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> The Executive Board of the Milwaukee United School Integration Committee, Milwaukee, to Dr. John W. Gardner, Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, Washington D.C., July 27, 1965, Special Collections, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee.

<sup>42</sup> Lloyd A. Barbee, Milwaukee United School Integration Committee, Milwaukee, to the citizens of Milwaukee, Milwaukee, March 10, 1966, Special Collections, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

At that current time, most of Milwaukee's Negro children attended one of the twenty-seven segregated schools within the inner core boundaries, while the majority of white students attended 120 schools outside of the inner core. MUSIC felt that this was unequal for the students in the inner core and unrealistic and undemocratic for students outside of the inner core. It deprived all students of meaningful preparation for life in a multiracial world.<sup>44</sup>

The main reason why MUSIC asked citizens to vote against this proposal was because it would escalate segregation in Milwaukee public schools. At the time of the referendum there were many proposals for new schools. The majority of these proposed schools were to be built in the inner core. These schools included: Oliver Wendell Holmes and Edward A. MacDowell Elementary Schools and Francis Parkman Junior High and an unnamed Elm Area Junior High. This was worrisome because of districting. Students who completed their elementary education in segregated core schools would then be moved into junior highs within the inner core. They then would be sent to high schools within the inner core. Nowhere in the proposals for new schools was there a provision for placement of what might be an integrated school.<sup>45</sup>

Many newsletters also came about during this time. One of these was "Dawning Times" which was created to keep people informed about the Sub-system Project. This newsletter began in March, 1965 and aimed to improve education for all students in the inner core schools. The schools targeted were North Division High School, North's Downtown Campus, Roosevelt and Fulton Junior High Schools, and Lee and Twelfth

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

Street Elementary Schools.<sup>46</sup> The Sub-system Project was an application for a Title III grant. A Title III grant is used to improve academic programs, institutional management, and fiscal stability in order to improve self-sufficiency.<sup>47</sup>

The students in the Milwaukee schools also were very involved in the movement. The activities which they participated in most were the Freedom Schools. The Freedom Schools took place when there was a boycott on the public schools. This allowed students to keep up with their studies, to discuss the meaning of freedom, and also explore other areas of study, such as African-American history. The students also looked at influential Negroes in a number of fields. These fields included: science, art, education, statesmen, writers, publishers, and heroes, just to name a few. There was also a story, poetry, and drama unit which allowed students to express themselves. All of the students also entered an essay writing contest.

The first of the Freedom Schools was established on May 18, 1964. This was sponsored by MUSIC. This day was picked because it marked the tenth anniversary of the US Supreme Court's school desegregation decision.<sup>48</sup> This was only a one day withdrawal from the public schools. Instead of attending their regular schools the children attended thirty-three different churches in Milwaukee which had opened their doors for the students. Reasons for this withdrawal were all connected to the segregation which was taking place in Milwaukee. This segregation included both the schools and the way that thirty-seven classes of Negro children who were being bused to "white schools" were still being segregated. It was felt that Negro children were receiving an

---

<sup>46</sup> Dawning Times, March 1968.

<sup>47</sup> Milwaukee Public Schools, *A Sub-System Approach to the Problems of a Large City School System*, March 1968.

<sup>48</sup> MUSIC, *Keep Your Children out of School*, May 18, 1964, Special Collections, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee.

inferior education.<sup>49</sup> At the end of the day, there was a Freedom Day Hootenanny which took place for the children who attended the Freedom Schools. This included dancing, food, and music. MUSIC reported that 16,000 students attended one of the thirty-three freedom schools, staffed by 370 teachers.<sup>50</sup>

Parents were also asked to participate in the Freedom Day/Freedom School in May, 1964. Parents were given a list of segregated public schools and were asked to join the picket lines after dropping their children off at the Freedom School. These sites included twelve schools and the Milwaukee School Board.<sup>51</sup>

Another school boycott took place from October 18, 1965 until October 22, 1965. This boycott lasted a week so Freedom Schools were necessary for the students so they could keep up with their school work. There were many reasons for this extended boycott. Again, the main reason was the segregation of the schools. It was also noted that the “special committee” which was assigned to investigate racial imbalance in the schools had repeatedly failed to meet during the past year.<sup>52</sup>

This boycott differed from the one in May, 1964 because it encouraged white students to participate as well.<sup>53</sup> Although the number of white students who participated is unknown, it is important to note that this boycott also targeted students from outside of the inner core. The targeted curriculum for this Freedom School included Negro history, the meaning of freedom and democracy, teaching students that they have the right to

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Unknown, to Dr. James Barrett, Chairman of Special Committee on Milwaukee de facto Segregation, March 12, 1966, Special Collections, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee.

<sup>51</sup> MUSIC, *Freedom Day May 18 Parent Instructions*, May 1964, Special Collections, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee.

<sup>52</sup> MUSIC, *Facts about the Freedom Schools and the Pending School Boycott, Oct. 18-22, 1965*, Special Collections, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee.

<sup>53</sup> Marilyn Morheuer, Executive Coordinator of MUSIC, Milwaukee, to Concerned Citizens, Milwaukee, September 30, 1965, Special Collections, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee.

believe in themselves, and the worth and meaning of good education.<sup>54</sup> The Freedom School Teachers for this extended boycott included university professors, artists, musicians, professional teachers, individual professionals, and university students. There were also a number of student's parents who volunteered their time to help out.

Students also participated in single school boycotts. On March 28, 1966, North Division High School held its own boycott.<sup>55</sup> They did this because in the previous three years the Milwaukee School Board had refused to listen to thousands of voices asking for equal, integrated public schools. By having this boycott, North Division showed the nation that their students were ready to stand up and be counted because they wanted freedom immediately.<sup>56</sup>

Students also participated in a number of the organizations which were fighting for integration. By joining these organizations they became student representatives for their peers. This allowed the students' voices to be heard when decisions involving them were being made. An example of this can be seen in the Washington Area Community Council Minutes from March 21, 1972.<sup>57</sup> Roderick Woods, a student representative from Washington High School, was present at this meeting and was asked what he felt needed to be done at the school. He replied that he would like to see the council help out in three ways. First, he wanted the council to get those who could change things to change the things that needed changing. He cited curriculum and teacher and administrative attitudes toward students as examples of what needed to be changed. Second, he thought

---

<sup>54</sup> MUSIC, *Why Hurt me More?*, Special Collections, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee.

<sup>55</sup> MUSIC, *WHY*, Special Collections, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Washington Area Community Council, *Washington Area Community Council Minutes*, March 21, 1972, Special Collections, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee.

that the parents of students needed to become more involved. Third, he wanted to council to make people in the wider community aware of the situation at Washington.

Having student representatives also allowed for organizations to see the progress being made or not being made. At a Washington District Community Council meeting, formerly the Washington Area Community Council, Washington student representative, Barbara Wagner, reported that the conditions between the students and teachers were about ninety-five percent better than they had been the previous school year.<sup>58</sup>

The movement towards school desegregation in Milwaukee was a long one, beginning in 1963 and ending in 1976. There were many steps taken and many people involved. But how did the students feel about it? What effect would it have on them?

---

<sup>58</sup> Washington District Community Council, *WDCC General Meeting Minutes*, September 20, 1972, Special Collections, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee.

## **Student Thought and Desegregation Impact on Students**

The people who were affected the most by the desegregation of the Milwaukee schools were the students who attended the schools. Their opinions on how they were affected are very important to my paper. The following information is from a collection of letters, located in the archives at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, from students and parents to Father James Groppi. These letters were written during the time of the desegregation movement in Milwaukee. One problem with these sources is that the letters were mostly written by minority students, in grades six through eight, who supported Groppi. This limits the perspective given. Another problem is that most of the letters do not identify which school the student is from. All that is known is that they are from Milwaukee.<sup>59</sup>

The letters which were included in this collection from students were very supportive of Groppi and his work in the desegregation of Milwaukee. The relationships which he had built with the students, especially those who attended St. Boniface, were very obvious in the letters. Many of the students began their letters with, “Dear Daddy,” or “Freedom Daddy,” and closed with, “Your Daughter,” or, “Your Son.” In 1967, when Groppi was considering leaving St. Boniface and the NAACP Youth Counsel (YC), the students expressed their feelings about how much they would miss him. This further shows the relationship that Groppi had with the students.

The letters that the students wrote also showed the opinions of some of the older students. Most of these letters had to do with the YC. Apparently there were tensions between the organization and Groppi. The younger students were also having problems

---

<sup>59</sup> Groppi, James, 1930-, Papers, 1964-1978, Milwaukee Manuscript Collection EX and Milwaukee Tape 5, Wisconsin Historical Society, Milwaukee Area Research Center, UWM Libraries, University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee.

with members of the YC. One student wrote about how the older kids claim to do all the work but the younger ones were singing, picketing, and “shouting their heads off.”<sup>60</sup>

One letter written by a member of the YC showed that although there were problems between the organization and Groppi not everyone felt the same way. The letter was dated April 13, 1970 and was written by Jimmie Pierce to Father Groppi. Pierce stated that, “everyone of us at Commando’s Project is in debt to you.” He then went on to talk about the ways that Groppi had helped the organization. The main point that he made was that Groppi had made them less violent. They stopped fighting each other and learned who the “true enemy was.” It can be assumed that the “true enemy” was anyone who was against open housing and school integration. Pierce also showed how much respect he had for Groppi by saying that the YC needed him. There was no leadership without Groppi and the black community would fall apart without him. He also showed an understanding for why Groppi had left the organization by saying that he knows that the community had let Groppi down. Another letter relating to the students support of Groppi said that “our race will someday be sorry because we may never again have a great man to help us again.”

The letters also gave much insight into how the students felt about their community during this volatile time. Many of the letters actually showed anger towards other Blacks and blamed them for their situation. One seventh grader wrote in March of 1967 that they “fight with each other instead of against the white man. The Negro makes himself left out.” Another student wrote that “Negros act like fools or make themselves look dumb. That’s why they’re segregated.”

---

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

The student's letters also showed the fight that they had within themselves. Many students proclaimed that "it's right to fight for your freedom." There were also many references to the protests. One letter talked about the buttons that the children wore during protests and picketing. They said, "Burn Baby Burn." They also sang songs with phrases like, "Ain't gonna let no Bishop turn me round, not gonna let no school board turn me round."

Many students wrote letters because they could not express their opinions and join the demonstrations publicly. The main reason for this was because of their parents. One student wrote in 1967 that they supported Groppi but couldn't show it because their parents were against Groppi and his involvement in the movement. The student also stated that their parents thought that Groppi should leave Milwaukee. Another student said that her mother would not let her go on the picket line. This does not necessarily mean that her mother did not support Groppi's cause. She simply might have felt that the picket line was not a safe place for her daughter.

It is very important to consider the viewpoints of the parents when looking at the opinions of the students. Parents have the most impact on a child when they are growing up. The feelings of the parent make an impression on their child. These letters were from parents of both black and white students. For the most part the letters criticized Groppi for his actions. Many felt that he was fighting a good cause but was going about it the wrong way.

One black man wrote to Groppi about his actions. He wondered how Groppi could justify hurting whites to gain social justice. He stated that there was only one society, the American society, not Negro and white. He felt that equality must be earned.

He also expressed a loss in trust in the Catholic Church, especially a loss in trust of the priests. He was especially having trouble going to confession since he no longer trusted the priests.

Another letter writer felt that Groppi should try to reach even one or two juveniles and help straighten their poor souls and bodies. They felt this would be much more beneficial than parading them around at protests and encouraging their civil disobedience. An example of this civil disobedience would be the student school strike and the picketing. Many adults also wrote about actions which they thought were because of Groppi's influence. One writer was concerned that children were learning to riot and march instead of learning that it was wrong to steal and beat up other people. There were also many letters written about the disrespect that children showed towards authority.

Some parents were against the integration of the schools all together. One parent said that "there will always be children who don't learn well whether they're in all white, all Negro, or mixed schools." Some also felt that it was the fault of the clergy that the students were not doing well in school. They were taking them out of the schools and spending a lot of time fighting for school integration instead of focusing on school work. One parent stated, "Clergy should use the time they're wasting and have special help after school."

As you can see the students' opinions were differing. Some supported the cause while others did not. There were also a number of factors which influenced the opinions of the students. The greatest of these factors were the parents and adults in their lives. Besides these letters, there are also studies from other school districts. An article which combines many of these studies is "The Impact of School Desegregation on Aspiration,

Self-Concepts and Other Aspects of Personality” by Edgar G. Epps.<sup>61</sup> Unfortunately there is not a study which measured the impact of the Milwaukee desegregation on students but it is possible to make conclusions based off of the other studies.

Studies conducted among black students attending desegregated northern schools showed that they were less likely to drop out of high school. It also showed that they were more likely to enter college. However, Epps warns that many there is a correlation between this and socio-economic status. Most of the black students in Milwaukee lived in the inner core. This meant that most of them belonged to a lower socio-economic class.

Self-esteem is another common factor looked at in studies on desegregation. It is important to understand that academic self-concept is more closely related to school achievement than total self-esteem when the impact of desegregation on self-concept is looked at. This means that it is important to look at which aspects of self-esteem are affected by desegregation and under what conditions. Studies found that black students in the North scored higher than blacks in the South in the area of self-esteem. However, this does not necessarily connect to desegregation. In fact, black students attending predominantly black schools have higher self-esteem than those attending predominantly white schools. While this was true in some studies there were other studies which indicate that there is no difference in self-esteem between black students who attended segregated and desegregated schools. This is why it is important to keep in mind that the results vary based on conditions.

---

<sup>61</sup> Edgar G. Epps, “The Impact of School Desegregation on Aspirations, Self-Concepts and Other Aspects of Personality,” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 39, no. 2 (1975): 300-313.

Other studies have looked at students' sense of environmental control. Students control their environment with their internal control. White students typically have higher scores than black students and middle class students score higher than lower class students because they have a higher sense of internal control. However, it is important to note that blacks in desegregated schools had higher levels of internal control than black in segregated schools.

One study compared the results of self-esteem and internal control. There were four combinations with these two factors. Students with both high self-esteem and internal control are characterized as "achievers." Students with both low self-esteem and internal control are characterized as "drifters." Those with low self-esteem and high internal control are "accepters." The final category is for those students with high self-esteem and low internal control. These students are characterized as "militants." I feel that this is the category which the Milwaukee students fit into. As stated earlier, black students usually have higher self-esteem. However, due to the fact that they were unable to control their surroundings and had much chaos going on around them they had low internal control.

Many people also worry about the anxiety of the students when they move from a segregated school to a desegregated school. This is one area in which study results differ from one part of the country to another. One study was conducted in four southern California school districts. This study showed that black children had significantly higher levels of anxiety than their white or Mexican-American peers. A study that I feel fits better with Milwaukee is a study on the desegregation of Ann Arbor, Michigan

schools. This study indicated that the black transfer students showed no change, or sometimes a decrease, in school-related anxiety.

## **Conclusion**

The Milwaukee public schools desegregation process was a long one. It involved many different people and methods. Some of these people include Father James Groppi, Lloyd Barbee, the organization MUSIC, the parents, and the students. Some of the different approaches taken were freedom schools, boycotts, protests, and legal actions. All of the time and effort would eventually pay off. The 1976-77 school year was the first year of school desegregation in the Milwaukee school district.<sup>62</sup> This was achieved through redistricting, busing, and open-enrollment. The open-enrollment policy is what keeps the district integrated today.

---

<sup>62</sup> Coalition for Peaceful Schools, August 13, 1976.

## **Bibliography**

### **Secondary Sources**

- Aukofer, Frank A. *City with a Chance*. Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1968.
- Clotfelter, Charles T. *After Brown: the Rise and Retreat of School Desegregation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004.
- Dentler, Robert A. and Marvin B. Scott. *Schools on Trial: An Inside Account of the Boston Desegregation Case*. Cambridge, MA: Abt Books, 1981.
- Doyle, Mary C. "From Desegregation to Resegregation: Public Schools in Norfolk, Virginia, 1954-2002." *Journal of African American History* 90, no. ½ (2003): 64-83.
- Epps, Edgar G. "The Impact of School Desegregation on Aspirations, Self-Concepts, and Other Aspects of Personality." *Law and Contemporary Problems* 39, no. 2 (1975): 300-313.
- Gitlin, Todd. *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*. Toronto: Bantam Books, 1987.
- Holden, Anna. *The Bus Stops Here: a Study of School Desegregation in Three Cities*. New York: Agathon Press, 1974.
- Lomotey, Kofi and Charles Teddlie. *Forty years after the Brown Decision: Social and Cultural Effects of School Desegregation*. New York: AMS Press, 1997.
- Lytle, Mark Hamilton. *America's Uncivil Wars: The Sixties Era from Elvis to the Fall of Richard Nixon*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Rossell, Christine H. and Willis D. Hawley. *The Consequences of School Desegregation*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983.
- Theoharis, Jeanne and Komozi Woodard. *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America*. New York: New York University Press, 2005.

### **Primary Sources**

- Barbee, Lloyd A., 1925-2002. Papers, 1933-1982. Milwaukee Manuscript Collection 16 and Milwaukee Micro Collection 42. Wisconsin Historical Society. Milwaukee Area Research Center. UWM Libraries. University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.
- Department of Public Instruction. *1975 thru 1977: School District Census*. December, 1977.

Department of Public Instruction. *Minority Enrollments in WI Public School Districts, 1976-1977*, by Barbara Thompson. March 1977.

Gropi, James, 1930-. Papers, 1964-1978. Milwaukee Manuscript Collection EX and Milwaukee Tape 5. Wisconsin Historical Society. Milwaukee Area Research Center. UWM Libraries. University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee.

Milwaukee United School Integration Committee. Records, 1964-1966. Milwaukee Manuscript Collection 5. Wisconsin Historical Society. Milwaukee Area Research Center. UWM Libraries. University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee.

*Population Notes: Blacks in Wisconsin*. February, 1989.

WI Department of Public Instruction. *1999-2000 Public Enrollment by District, Ethnicity, and Gender*. Madison, 2000.

WI State Committee to the US Commission on Civil Rights. *Impact of School Desegregation in Milwaukee Public Schools on Quality Education for Minorities—15 Years Later*. Washington D.C.: The Commission, 1992.