

From Distant Shores: A Library and Community Heritage

Arthur S. Meyers
Director
Hammond Public Library

Walt Whitman's poetry came to Muncie. Nearly every page of *Leaves of Grass* sings of the richness of America's ethnic heritage. His love and praise of the rainbow of America, even before the Statue of Liberty was planned, are as powerful today as a century and a quarter ago. He saw the land as a "teeming Nation of nations."

Bert Faulhaber, Ming-Ming Kuo, Lotis Slayton and Claude Williams also came to Muncie, as did many others from distant shores or other parts of the United States. They came to the community called "Middletown" by sociologists for its supposed lack of diversity. Together, they brought a richness of ethnic heritage that was presented in a series of photo exhibits and community activities from 1981 to 1986. If the heritage was found in Muncie, it can surely be found in every community.

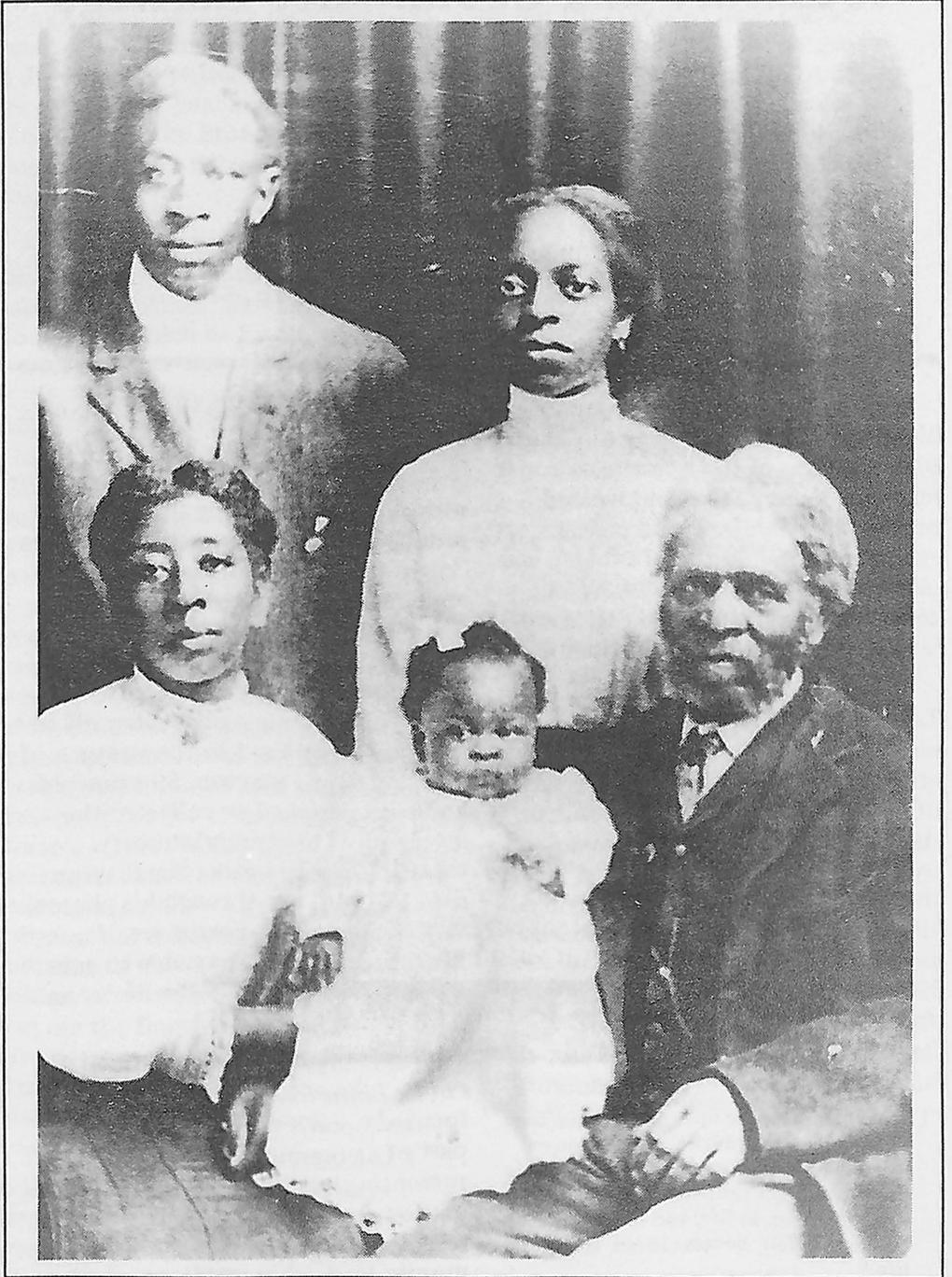
"I believe of all those men and women that fill'd the unnamed lands, every one exists this hour here or elsewhere, invisible to us. In exact proportion to what he or she grew from in life, and out of what he or she did, felt, became loved, sinn'd, in life."

So Whitman wrote. And a photograph exhibit that conveys a community's rich mix (hidden, perhaps out of lack

of pride) can bring his words to public awareness.

Seven years ago, seeking to bring forward the history of the Black community of Muncie, we asked people to "open the trunks" of family photos and lend them to the Library for an exhibit. The purpose was to show how the community's local heritage paralleled the larger national history, from young Muncie men going off to war in World War I to the strength of families. Lotis Slayton, 89 years old, had photographed or collected the moments of his family's history through seventy years. Mr. Slayton died in 1986, but through his photos, viewers and, later, borrowers of our Picture Collection were able to gain a sense of a century in the life of an Afro-American family.

In this first project, (described in *Public Libraries*, Summer 1982) we focused upon a visible yet invisible part of a community; people representing less than 10% of the population and very much under-represented in professional and community leadership positions. A grant from the Indiana Committee for the Humanities enabled us to develop the exhibit, "Heritage Trail: Afro-Amer-



*Lotis Slayton (rear, left)
and his family,
Hannibal, Missouri, 1911*

ican History Alive!" It conveyed the continuity of the past with our lives today. We displayed separate photo panels from the exhibit throughout the community, creating a "trail" for people to follow as they looked at the individual panels in the mall, a bank, churches, schools, and other public locations.

Among the panel themes were "The Strength of Our Women," "Living and Working in Muncie," and "We Fought for America." With the exhibits, we held a community forum for senior citizens to talk about the local heritage, and a reception for contributors of the photos, with the Mayor proclaiming Afro-American History Month. An accompanying essay by a Ball State University historian deepened public understanding.

Eventually, our local exhibit led to a state-wide photo display of Black Hoosier heritage entitled "This Far By Faith." It was a collaborative project of the Indiana Committee for the Humanities, the Indiana Historical Society, and Muncie Public Library. Both projects won national awards.

From "Heritage Trail," we moved to "Appalachian Heritage," as many Muncie residents have roots in Kentucky and Tennessee. Another grant from ICH enabled the Library to print photos loaned by local families, and again an accompanying essay by a Ball State historian provided a sketch of the migration and settlement. For this exhibit, we displayed a longer essay with the photos on the panels. (We later realized the exhibit contained too much text and thus was not as much appreciated.)

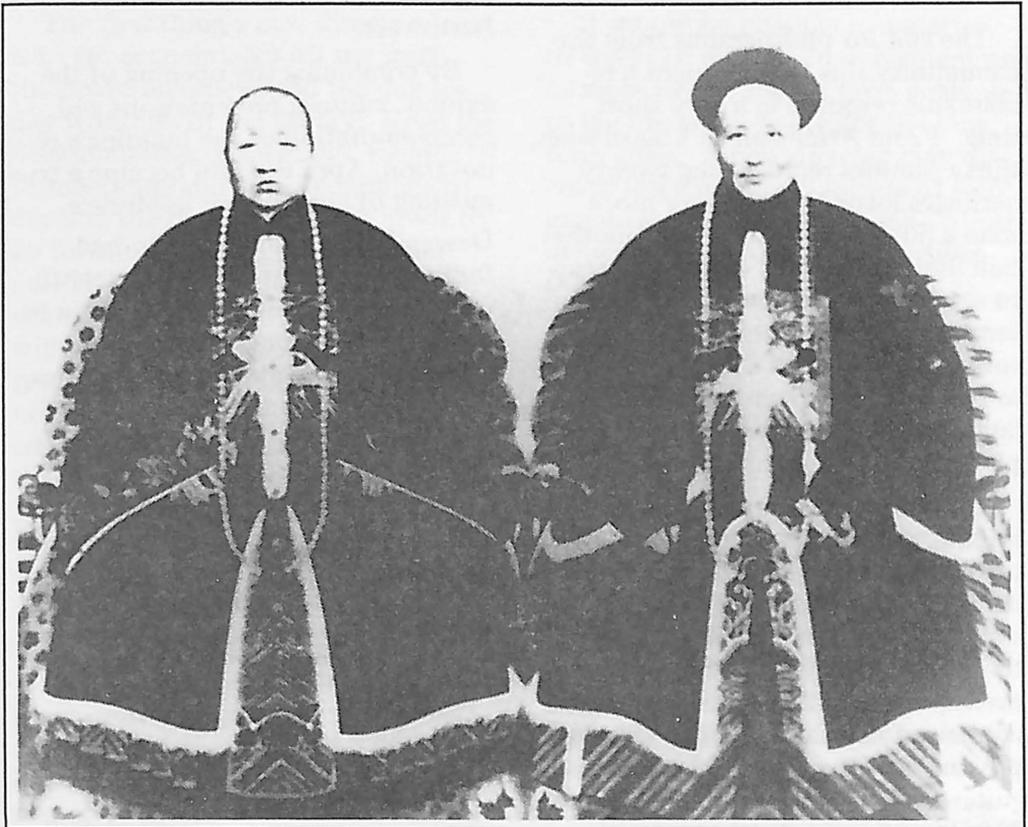
This project had two new elements. Part of the grant funding was used for five Saturday afternoon family programs in the Muncie Children's Museum, comprised of music performances and craft demonstrations. Clog-dancing, fiddling, bluegrass play-

ing and singing, an explanation of mountain instruments, demonstrations of crafts (spinning, weaving, and lacemaking), storytelling, talks on folkways, and displays of toys and other objects brought the heritage home to a wide audience. And like "Heritage Trail," the new photo display moved on to other public locations. At a high school, a teenager saw his grandmother's picture as the exhibit was being set up. He called out to his friends to share the joy of his discovery. Tim Williams' grandmother was the only Black person in the Appalachian Heritage display. Her migration pattern was caused by the family escaping from the Ku Klux Klan.

The second new element in this project was the funding of a videotape conveying the heritage. This was accomplished through interviews with four families in the area, footage of the photo exhibit, portions of the music performances and craft demonstrations, and some documentary footage taken from an older film of the region. In each of the projects, photos from outside Muncie provided a link to the larger history of the group. The videotape also included one of the contributors reading a poem on the destruction that resulted from strip mining. The video conveyed the meaning of the Appalachian experience by showing the families at home, outdoors, at work, in church, and at a family picnic. For the area's State Senator, it captured him in the Indiana Legislature. The contributors spoke especially about the difficult economic conditions in Appalachia, their years in the Muncie area, and the importance of family and church in their lives. The film reached a wide audience through showings on public television in east central Indiana. It may be borrowed through the ICH Resource Center.



*The parents of Claude Williams on their wedding day
in Wilder, Tennessee, 1908.*



*Ming-Ming Kuo's grandparents
in ancestor portraits for family worship,
Shanghai, China, 1920*

"Here is not merely a nation but a teeming Nation of Nations," Whitman wrote, and as he called out to other lands and heard the sounds of working people, he expressed for all times a sense of the oneness of the country. And if we begin with FDR's salute to the Daughters of the American Revolution as his "fellow immigrants," we can easily conclude that a microcosm of the larger society can also be found in "Middletown."

The idea of seeking this American portrait arose as the Library was completing a two-year renovation of the historic landmark Main Library, funded originally by Andrew Carnegie. It seemed natural to convey the remaining heritages through another ICH-funded project, a photo exhibit and cultural presentations entitled "From Distant Shores: The Heritage of Muncie's Families."

The call for photographs from the community this time brought a remarkable response in a very short time. From Armenian to Yugoslavian, thirty families representing twenty heritages loaned the Library more than a hundred photos. With another Ball State historian's essay, we began to see the Muncie images not only in terms of the community's local history of more than a century, but also in the larger Whitman image of a land that has welcomed diverse peoples throughout its history.

The portraits were grouped by themes, with Whitman's poetry interspersed, on free-standing display panels and were shown for the first time at a community open house in the renovated Main Library. The event drew a wide cross-section of the community to the building. Cultural presenters (song, dance, classical guitar) shared with the audience of 250 the richness of eight heritages. The Mayor proclaimed "Muncie Public Library Heritage Day," coin-

iding with the beginning of National Library Week. Chinese, German, Greek, Jewish, Portuguese, and Swiss contributors to the exhibit shared their pride with friends, family and even strangers.

One contributor wrote "Your project provided the very first documented source for my children and their children to trace their roots a hundred years from now." Wide coverage by the newspapers, public television and two radio stations brought the meaning of the exhibit to an even wider audience. And, as in the earlier photo projects, the 50 pictures were later shown in public locations in the community, and were eventually added to the Library's Picture Collection. The ICH grants enabled the Library to develop an impressive file of local family photographs, reflecting diverse heritages, for future borrowers.

By combining the opening of the exhibit, cultural presentations and commemoration of the building's renovation, April 6, 1986 became a true melding of community in Muncie.

Descendants of families who had farmed in the area in the nineteenth century and others who left China in 1949, faculty from Ball State who came to enjoy cultural presentations, persons whose families knew persecution in Europe, individuals with an interest in historic preservation, and senior citizens who have made good use of the building's new handicapped-accessible entrance, were present. We sensed the pride of the contributors as they shared their families' pictures.

"Sail, sail thy best, ship of Democracy,
Of value is thy freight, 'tis not the
Present only,
The Past is also stored in thee."