

## Race, Jobs, and the War: the FEPC in the Midwest, 1941-46

ISSN 0003-4827

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### Recommended Citation

"Race, Jobs, and the War: the FEPC in the Midwest, 1941-46." *The Annals of Iowa* 60 (2001), 354-356.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.10527>

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from another. Static electricity generated by the storms interrupted their radio reception, which distressed both, but especially Mary, who was deeply involved in the lives of characters in her favorite serials. But it is the near dailyness of the dust storms that is so astounding. The fence rows filled with dirt Henry had to dig out. The car and tractor stalled because of the static electricity. They had to give up on fieldwork when the dust blew too hard. As soon as the storms ended, Mary cleaned dust from the floors, furniture, closets, basement, out-houses, windows, and clothes. The work required simply to manage the dirt was added to the work of managing a farm and home. No wonder Mary rejoiced when three or four days passed without a dust storm.

The other appealing aspect of the diary is the extraordinariness of this poorly educated yet literary woman. She plainly reveals intimate details of their lives within the account of work and social events. She wrote about her fears, her quarrels with Henry, and her fondness for him. While possessing a healthy sense of humor, she was often deeply depressed. She endured problems with her ears, migraine headaches, and pain due to dental problems and overwork. And yet she was rarely discouraged. It seems to be the ordinariness of life that sustained her through the hardships of the Dust Bowl and her personal problems.

Riney-Kehrberg's introduction adequately provides the historical context for the diaries. She wisely limits her tampering with spelling and punctuation to only the most necessary explanatory remarks. Yet she misses opportunities for a more intensive analysis of Dyck's life. Readers will be tempted to try to understand whether the dust storms might have triggered Dyck's depression, how the couple managed to pay their bills with so little income, and whether she enjoyed the authority over the household that women expect. Dyck tells us so much, but there is still too much we don't know.

The diary ends with the accident that took the life of the Dycks' only son. Riney-Kehrberg fills in the outline of the Dycks' lives following the son's death, but readers may want to hear more from Mary Dyck because we have come to care about her.

*Race, Jobs, and the War: The FEPC in the Midwest, 1941-46*, by Andrew Edmund Kersten. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000. x, 210 pp. Illustrations notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 cloth.

Reviewer Eric Arnesen is professor of history and African-American studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He is the author of *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (2001) and *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863-1923* (1994).

The Second World War mobilized millions of American men and women, not just in the armed forces but in the labor force as well, as an economy wracked by depression dramatically shifted gears to become a juggernaut of production. If the United States played the role of "arsenal of democracy" to its allies abroad, it denied substantive democracy to a minority of its own citizens at home because of their race. Many contemporaries called attention to this patent contradiction at the time through their words and actions. Not only was the persistence of racial discrimination hypocritical, given the war's ostensible aims, but it was counterproductive as well. With a growing economy desperate for workers, what sense did it make for major industries to close their jobs to millions of African American workers? Protest forced the government's hand in 1941. Deeply troubled by A. Philip Randolph's threat to bring one hundred thousand African Americans to march on Washington, D.C., President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued his Executive Order 8802, which declared that discrimination on the basis of race, creed, color, or national origin was prohibited in essential war industries. To enforce the executive order, the president created the Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC).

In his solid study, *Race, Jobs, and the War*, Andrew Edmund Kersten has provided a detailed and compelling examination of the FEPC's ground operations in the midwestern states of Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Missouri, and Ohio. Given the magnitude of its task—racial discrimination was rampant among businesses and trade unions—the FEPC faced daunting odds with few resources. It was understaffed, underfunded, and deprived of the tools it needed to compel unions and businesses to comply with its directives. It also faced intense hostility not only from many of those charged with discrimination but from conservative senators and representatives in Congress as well. Despite its understaffing, the FEPC's government employees were dedicated and persistent, collecting vast quantities of data on employment and union discrimination, holding numerous public hearings to spotlight racism in industry and the trade union movement, and processing more than 12,000 cases, settling nearly 5,000 (42 percent) satisfactorily. In the Midwest, it addressed more than 1,400 such cases (settling roughly 35 percent satisfactorily). Over the course of the war, the position of African Americans (particularly men) in war industries improved, with their percentages growing from 2.5 percent in 1942 to 8.3 percent in late 1944. Although manpower shortages undoubtedly played a critical role, Kersten rightly contends that the FEPC helped pave their entry into new positions and reduced, at least somewhat, employer and union opposition to some black advancement.

In a series of case studies of wartime employment discrimination in a variety of states, Kersten's study reveals the uneven impact of the FEPC's efforts in the Midwest. He demonstrates that the FEPC often had an easier time adjusting minority workers' complaints in the upper Midwest than it did in certain communities in the southern parts of key states—St. Louis, Missouri; East Alton, Illinois; and Cincinnati, Ohio, for instance—where employers and white unions proved more recalcitrant. Kersten also argues persuasively that where local civil rights associations (and, in some cases, CIO unions) were strong and active, the FEPC had greater success than where such groups were not. More than any other study of the FEPC or wartime antidiscrimination policy, Kersten's book makes the convincing case that the FEPC's success often depended on local activists in progressive labor groups and civil rights organizations who provided considerable evidence and support for FEPC officials.

Kersten's interpretation of the FEPC's operation and accomplishments is a nuanced one. Like some critics of the FEPC, he acknowledges that it merely "dented but did not overcome prejudice and discrimination" in the labor market (2) and that market forces—mainly the intensifying demand for labor—contributed to advances for African Americans. Kersten sides with those who credit the agency with doing much good, with using "tight labor markets to push industrial gates further open for minority workers," intervening to end white workers' hate strikes, creating "an atmosphere that fostered change," and serving as a "catalyst motivating employers, workers, and activists to fight and adopt fair employment practices in the Midwest" (137).

Ultimately, of course, it is impossible to quantify the respective roles played by the FEPC and the growing labor demand. Kersten establishes the significance of the FEPC in midwestern cities and towns through his account of its successes and failures. The history of African Americans' civil rights activism during World War II is a rich and important subject that historians have only recently begun to explore. Given this book's brief length, Kersten merely opens up the subject for discussion rather than providing a definitive account of the interaction between grassroots activists and the federal agency. *Race, Jobs, and War* is an important contribution to the literature on employment discrimination, African American protest, antidiscrimination politics, and the federal role in managing wartime race relations. It will serve as a crucial reference in subsequent studies of the subject.

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