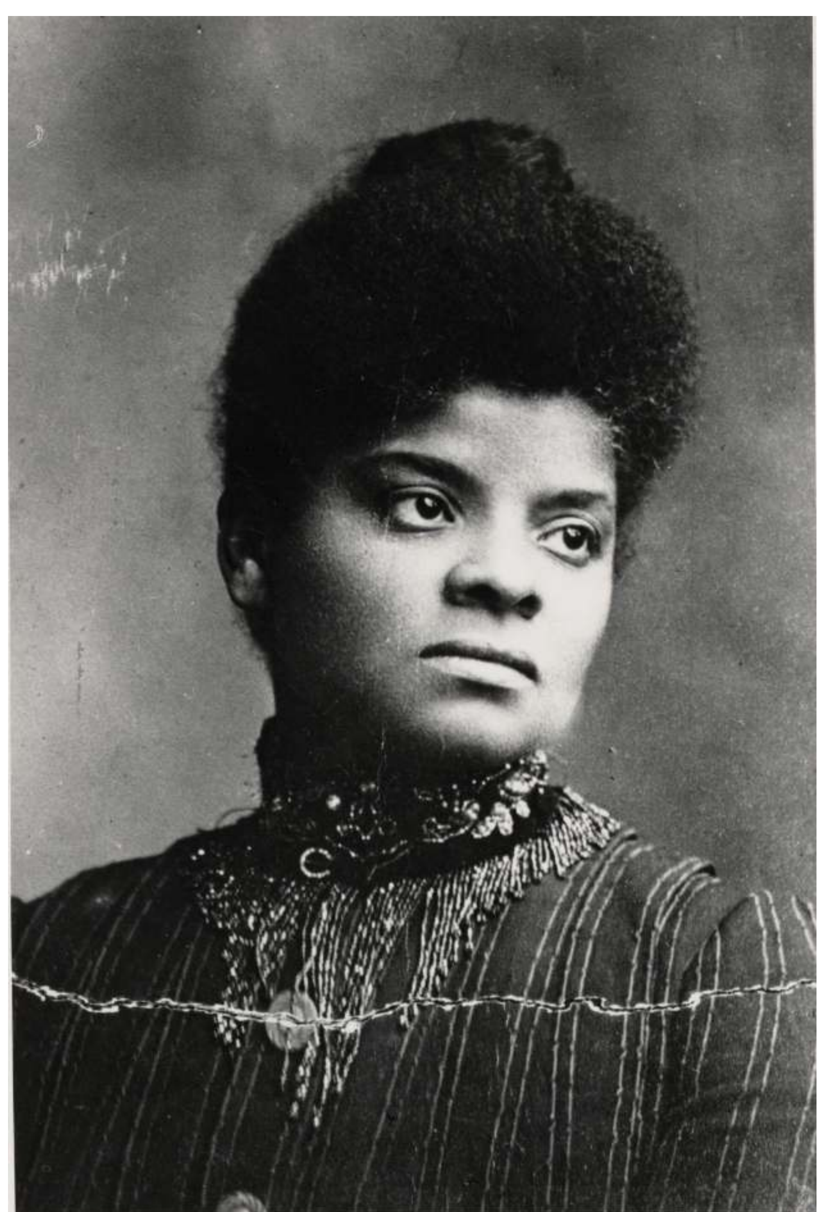
RESOURCE:

Life Story: Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1862-1931)



Ida B. Wells-Barnett

Cihak and Zima, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett*, ca. 1893-1894. University of Chicago Library, Special Collections Research Center.

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Growing Up

Ida B. Wells was not yet three when the Civil War ended and slavery was abolished, so she had no personal memory of being enslaved. But she heard her parents' stories and saw the scars on her mother's back from beatings she had suffered. Slavery was a stark reality for Ida, but her own childhood was spent in, and shaped by, Reconstruction. From 1865 to 1877, the federal government established the ground rules for Southern states' readmission to the Union, and federal troops kept order in the South. Black Americans gained freedom, citizenship, and the right to vote during these years. They also contended with fear, poverty, and the sometimes violent hostility of many whites.

Ida grew up in Holly Springs, Mississippi, the oldest of eight children. Her parents, James and Elizabeth Wells, learned to read after slavery and made sure their children were educated. James had been trained as a carpenter and was able to support his family without becoming a sharecropper, the fate that kept so many blacks in conditions similar to slavery. He was self-sufficient, determined, and proud. When his former owner's wife asked him to visit, he refused. In 1867, when black men in Mississippi could vote for the first time, his white employer told him to vote for the Democrats, but again he refused.

When Ida was 16, her family faced a terrible tragedy when her parents and baby brother died of yellow fever. The six remaining Wells children were orphaned, and Ida "suddenly found myself head of a family." She went to work as a schoolteacher. She also continued her own studies, taught Sunday school, and did the family's cooking, washing, and ironing. Three years later, in 1881, Ida and her two youngest sisters moved fifty miles away to Memphis, Tennessee, to live with their aunt, where Ida continued to teach.

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Meeting Jim Crow

The South was changing. Reconstruction was over. A harsh new system called Jim Crow was gradually constricting black people's rights and freedoms and enforcing segregation, often through intimidation and violence. Jim Crow was eventually written into law, but much of it was based on social customs and the whims of individuals, as Ida learned.

When she was 22, Ida bought a first-class ticket on a train from Memphis to Holly Springs and took a seat in the ladies' car, something she had done for the previous two years. This time, however, the conductor told her to move. Ida resisted, and when he tried to drag her from her seat, she bit his hand. Two men helped him forcibly remove her as white passengers applauded.
After she was removed from the train, she sued the railroad for damages and won, but her triumph was short-lived, as the railroad won on appeal. Jim Crow was becoming the law of the land.

In 1886, when she was 24, Ida lost her teaching job after she criticized conditions in the Memphis schools. She had written a few articles for newspapers and decided to turn to journalism full time. Three years later, she bought a share in the *Memphis Free Speech and Headlight* and was appointed its editor. She was the first female co-owner and editor of a black newspaper in the US. She began writing articles and editorials under the name "Iola."

Crusader Against Lynching

The major turning point in Ida's life came in 1892. Her friend Thomas Moss, a Memphis letter carrier and grocer, was lynched by a mob after confrontations with rival white grocers. Shocked, Ida bought a pistol and wrote an editorial urging African Americans

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to move out of Memphis for their safety. Then she began to focus her work on the rise in lynchings in America.

By the 1890s, lynching was a terrorist campaign to solidify white control of the South. Victims were often black men accused of raping white women. Ida doubted these accusations, noting that often the charge was made after a man had been hanged or burned or shot or beaten. She thought it more likely that victims had been in a consensual relationship with a white woman or, like her friend Thomas Moss, were businessmen who threatened rival whites and had no connection to white women at all.

Ida wrote a series of anti-lynching editorials. The last one suggested that white women could find black men romantically appealing, and she headed north for three weeks as it hit the newsstands. Editors of white newspapers in the South reprinted the editorial and called for white men to avenge their women. While she was in New York, Ida learned of threats against her and against her friends and family. The offices of her newspaper were burned. It was clear she could not return to Memphis. From then on she lived in the North, mostly in Chicago, and changed her pen name to “Exiled.”

Ida documented 728 lynching cases that had occurred between 1884 and 1892, using research by the *Chicago Tribune*. Within months of her friend’s murder, she wrote a collection of articles under the title Southern Horrors. She focused less on grisly details and more on the false accusations made against the victims. Her goal was “to arouse the conscience of America,” and she became America’s best-known crusader against lynching.

Suffragist

Ida was also a staunch supporter of women securing the right to vote. She published “How Enfranchisement Stops Lynching” in *Original Rights Magazine* in 1910, showing

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that when black voters in Illinois elected a black state legislator in 1904, he worked to pass a law against mob violence. She co-founded the Alpha Suffrage Club in Chicago in 1913, which became the largest black women's suffrage organization in Illinois. In addition to supporting women's efforts to obtain the vote, the Alpha Suffrage Club taught women how to be politically active and promoted black candidates for office.

Ida marched in the 1913 suffrage parade in Washington, DC, when many of the organizers resisted black women's participation in the parade. After black women were told they would march in segregated sections, the NAACP organized letter and telegram protests. The parade organizers relented and black suffragists, including Ida, marched in their state and occupational delegations.

Later years

She continued her work for decades, traveling abroad to decry lynching and raise money and working with women's clubs to encourage political participation, even running for state office herself. In 1922, she supported an antilynching bill then before Congress. Because of Democratic opposition, the bill failed, as did all federal efforts to end lynching, white supremacy's weapon of terror.

In 2018, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice opened in Montgomery, Alabama, to commemorate more than 4,400 African American men, women, and children lynched between 1877 and 1950.

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Discussion Questions

- How did Ida's personality and childhood prepare her for life as a crusader?
- What strategies did Ida use to fight against lynching? What did she think would happen when America's conscience was aroused?
- How did Ida connect voting and lynching?

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RESOURCE:

Life Story: Edith Maude Eaton, aka Sui Sin Far (1865-1914)

Edith Maude Eaton (aka Sui Sin Far)

Edith Maude Eaton. Courtesy of Simon Fraser University, image from the private collection of Diana Birchall, granddaughter of Winnifred Eaton.

Edith Maude Eaton was born on March 15, 1865 in Cheshire, England. She was the second of her parents' fourteen children. Her father was British and her mother was Chinese. They met when her father traveled to China for business.

As a child, Edith moved several times as her father sought work. When she was less than one year old, her family immigrated to the United States. They lived in New Jersey for two years before returning to England. Edith made her third trip across the Atlantic Ocean when she was seven. After passing through New York City, the Eaton family settled in Montreal, Canada.

Edith attended school until she was 11, when her parents decided she should be educated at home, where she could also help care for her younger siblings and assist her father in his work. When she was 14, she survived a severe case of rheumatic fever that resulted in lifelong breathing complications.

At the age of 18, Edith took a job as a stenographer for the *Montreal Daily Star* newspaper. Although her work was mostly clerical, she used the opportunity to launch a writing career. Edith proved she could write in a variety of formats. Local papers published her humorous essays, short stories, investigative articles, and more.

In 1890, the *Montreal Witness* hired her to report on the Chinese in Montreal. Although Edith was half Chinese, she had rarely interacted with the Chinese community. While reporting, she developed a deeper understanding of the culture and heritage she shared with the people she met. By 1895, Edith used her position to promote the fair and equal treatment of Chinese immigrants through articles and letters in local, national, and international publications.

In addition to journalism, Edith also enjoyed fiction writing. The people she met while working as a reporter informed her short stories. While she published some work under the name Edith Maude Eaton, she also frequently used pen names. One of her

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most famous was Sui Sin Far, a childhood nickname that means “water lily” in Cantonese.

Edith was fascinated with travel and believed that individuals should not be defined by the country in which they were born or lived. In 1896, she traveled to Jamaica to work as a journalist. After publishing over thirty articles in six months, she contracted malaria, which was particularly dangerous given her chronic breathing problems. She left Jamaica and moved to San Francisco instead. Edith called the United States home for over fifteen years. During that time, she lived in California, Washington, and Massachusetts, and traveled across the continent by train at least twice.

Edith continued to support herself as a stenographer and journalist while completing bigger writing projects. She frequently visited Chinatowns to observe daily life and report on what she saw. Edith brought a distinctive perspective to the Chinese American story. Because she was half Chinese, she could develop relationships within Chinese communities and observe daily life. Because she was half white, she could publish her ideas in notable newspapers and magazines, and easily immigrate to the United States and cross the border many times, a privilege denied most Chinese people in this era.

Edith wrote about the challenges Chinese immigrants faced in the United States and the ways in which the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and other laws shaped daily life. Edith went to great lengths to humanize her fictional characters, who were typically inspired by real people. She regularly highlighted the experiences of women, who had even fewer rights and opportunities than their male counterparts.

In the story “In the Land of the Free,” a Chinese immigrant is separated from her toddler son when she does not have the proper paperwork upon arrival in San Francisco. In “Sweet Sin: A Chinese-American Story,” a teenage girl in California with a

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white mother and Chinese immigrant father commits suicide after realizing that she will never truly belong to either culture. In "The Daughter of a Slave," a young woman escapes poverty in China by agreeing to an arranged marriage in America. But when she arrives, she learns her new husband has deceived her family and that she will be just as poor in her new life. Through such stories, Edith gave voice to immigrant women, criticized the bureaucracy that tore families apart, and explored the horrific impact of anti-immigrant racism on individuals' lives. Although much of her writing focused on Chinese culture, she covered other topics related to identity, nationalism, and race

Through her writing, Edith gave voice to immigrant women, criticized the bureaucracy that tore families apart, and explored the horrific impact of anti-immigrant racism on individuals' lives.

Edith was also interested in the parallels between white and Chinese culture—two worlds of which she was a member. She believed that the two were more similar than different, and that a shared fear of the other kept them apart. She publicly identified as a woman of mixed-race heritage, and wrote, "After all, I have no nationality and am not anxious to claim any. Individuality is more than nationality."

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By her early forties, Edith was an established writer in the United States. Many of her essays and stories were published in national magazines like *Good Housekeeping.* She received fan mail from admirers of her work. In 1909, she published her favorite short stories about Chinese Americans in a book named after one of her characters, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance.* It was the first fiction book published by a woman of Chinese descent in English, and one of the earliest popular books to present a sympathetic view of the Chinese American community.

Health complications forced Edith to return to Montreal in 1913. She died of heart disease less than a year later, on April 7, 1914. *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* went out of print shortly after her death. However, it was republished in 1995, and scholars who study Chinese American history consider it to still be an important resource today.

Vocabulary

- **bureaucracy:** A set of systems of structures within a government or other large organization.
- **chronic:** A permanent or ongoing condition.
- **fiction:** Something that is imagined or made up.
- **humanize:** To present as relatable and sympathetic.
- **humorous:** Funny
- **investigative:** Closely studying and researching.
- **penname:** A fake name used by a writer to keep his or her real name a secret.
- **stenographer:** An office worker who takes notes in shorthand.

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Discussion Questions

- How did Edith's heritage as half white British and half Chinese shape her view of the world and her work?
- Edith chose to publish much of her work under a Chinese pen name, not her European birth name. Why do you think she made this choice? What might this tell us about her own relationship with her mixed heritage?
- Edith made the United States her home for over a decade and focused the bulk of her writing on Chinese Americans. Why do you think she did this? What might have been attractive about this particular country and topic?

Suggested Activities

- Combine Edith's life story with the life stories of Ida B. Wells, Elizabeth Cochrane (aka Nellie Bly), and Jovita Idar Juárez, all of whom used a career in journalism to advocate for social reform.
- Read this life story and that of Zitkala-Sa. Both women had white fathers and non-white mothers. How were their views of the world and the opportunities afforded to them shaped by their mixed-race heritage?
- Connect this life story to the life story of Soto Shee in the *Chinese American: Exclusion/Inclusion* curriculum, a Chinese immigrant mother who experienced the very challenges Edith described in her writing. How did each woman experience life in the United States as a person of Chinese descent? How were their lives shaped by immigration policy?

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- Combine Edith's life story with a reading of one of her most famous works, "In the Land of the Free." Explore Edith's depiction of a Chinese immigrant mother and the way in which she criticizes the American government's policies through this short narrative.

Themes

SOCIAL REFORM, WORK, IMMIGRATION, JOURNALISM, ART AND CULTURE, LAWS & LEGAL STATUS

New-York Historical Society Curriculum Library Connections

- For more about the Chinese American experience, see *Chinese American: Exclusion/Inclusion*.

RESOURCE:

Life Story: Mary McLeod Bethune, (1875–1955)

Portrait of Mary McLeod Bethune

Carl Van Vechten, *Portrait of Mary McLeod Bethune*, 1949. Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division, Van Vechten Collection, Washington, D.C.

Mary McLeod Bethune Memorial, Washington, D.C.

Carol M. Highsmith, *Mary McLeod Bethune Memorial, Washington, D.C.*, 1980. Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

Mary McLeod Bethune was born on July 10, 1875 in Mayesville, South Carolina. She was one of seventeen children. Her parents and some of her older siblings had been enslaved before the Civil War. Mary spent much of her childhood balancing school and work in cotton fields. In 1888, she earned a scholarship to Scotia Seminary in North Carolina. After graduation in 1893, she continued her studies with the goal of completing missionary work in Africa. However, most churches sent only white missionaries abroad, so Mary became a teacher instead.

While teaching, Mary met fellow teacher Albertus Bethune. Mary and Albertus married in 1898 and had a son named Albert in 1899. Shortly after Albert's birth, the family moved to Daytona, Florida. Although the Ku Klux Klan had a chapter in Daytona, many black families moved to the area in search of jobs.

Mary saw an opportunity in this growing community. She knew that education was one of the few ways black citizens, especially black women, could break the cycle of poverty and dependence on racist systems when they were still denied voting rights and economic opportunities. There were very few schools for black girls in the area, so Mary founded one.

On October 3, 1904, Mary opened the Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute with only five students. The school focused on practical, employable skills, including domestic science, sewing, agriculture, and teaching. Within two years, she had 250 students, many of whom lived in the school's dormitories.

In 1907, Albertus left Mary. Although they would officially stay married until his death in 1918, Mary had to raise their son and manage her growing school alone.

Mary did not allow personal challenges to jeopardize her school. She worked tirelessly to keep the school running. Many of the school's supplies were donated secondhand or picked up by Mary at the local landfill. Mary had so little money that she wore

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secondhand clothing mended by her students in sewing class. Her hard work attracted the attention of both white and black philanthropists who vacationed in Florida. The school's board soon counted many of the nation's most famous businessmen as members, including John D. Rockefeller, Jr. In later years, black millionaire and businesswoman Madam C.J. Walker was a donor.

The school adapted to the community's changing needs. Mary added a high school and vocational programs. In 1911, she realized that none of the local hospitals served black patients. In response, she added a nursing program so that the school could open its own hospital.

By 1923, black education in Florida was changing. With more public schools opening, Mary shifted her focus to helping young women after high school. She merged her school with the older Cookman Institute for Men in Jacksonville. The new coed school was named Cookman-Bethune College. Mary served as the president of the school from its formation until 1942. By 1941, the school was a four-year college on a thirty-two-acre campus with fourteen buildings and 600 students.

Mary saw education as one way to fight against the injustices of racism in the United States. But she knew that teaching was not the only answer. Mary was active in anti-lynching and desegregation campaigns. During World War I, while her son served in the Army, she pressured the Red Cross to integrate its services. In 1924, she was elected president of the National Association of Colored Women. In 1935, she founded the National Council of Negro Women, for which she served as president from 1935 to 1949. She was also vice president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) from 1940 to 1955.

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People in the government noticed Mary. She participated in special commissions under President Calvin Coolidge and President Herbert Hoover. Through this work, she met First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt.

Eleanor and Mary believed it was possible to improve the status of women and people of color in America. Eleanor encouraged her husband, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, to give Mary a leadership role the New Deal. In 1934, Mary became director of the Division of Negro Affairs for the National Youth Administration (NYA), and with it, the highest-ranking black woman in the federal government to date. Mary fought for integrated state advisory boards, better skills training for youth, and more black staff and managers within the NYA. The NYA was the first federal agency to aid black youth through educational and vocational training projects.

Mary was also part of a small group that advised President Roosevelt on policies relating to black citizens. This group was known as FDR's "black cabinet."

"For I am my mother's daughter, and the drums of Africa still beat in my heart. They will not let me rest while there is a single Negro boy or girl without a chance to prove his worth."

Mary used her high-profile position in different ways to fight for racial equality and dignity. In 1938, Mary attended the Southern Conference on Human Welfare. When the session leader referred to her as "Mary," she insisted on being publicly recognized as "Mrs. Bethune." One onlooker noted that a black woman insisting on the title "Mrs." was a big political statement in the deeply segregated South. Closer to home, Mary participated in a 1939 picket line in Washington, D.C., when a local drugstore refused to hire black employees.

When the United States joined World War II, Mary contributed to the war effort as she continued to focus on equal rights. She worked with A. Phillip Randolph to persuade President Roosevelt to establish a Federal Committee on Fair Employment Practices and desegregate the defense industry. She also served as the assistant director of the Women's Army Corps during WWII. In that role, she advocated for black women in the armed forces.

Mary's relationship with the Roosevelts was so close that Eleanor gave Mary one of her husband's canes after his death. Mary enjoyed collecting canes and often walked with one, although she had no physical need for it. She believed carrying a cane gave her "swank" and earned respect.

After World War II, President Truman appointed Mary as a delegate to the San Francisco Conference, where the United Nations was formed. She retired to Florida in the late 1940s.

Shortly before her death, Mary wrote a "Last Will and Testament," which outlined her philosophy. In it, she emphasized the importance of love, hope, education, racial dignity, and support for future generations.

Mary died on May 18, 1955 of a heart attack. In 1974, a monument in her honor was unveiled to a crowd of 18,000 people. It was the first statue on public land in

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Washington, D.C., to honor a black woman. It includes a depiction of Mary handing her legacy to future generations.

Vocabulary

- **Eleanor Roosevelt:** The first lady of the United States from 1933 to 1945. She was also a civil rights activist and delegate to the United Stations.
- **John D. Rockefeller, Jr.:** An American businessman and philanthropist. The son of the founder of Standard Oil, John D. Rockefeller.
- **Ku Klux Klan:** A white supremacy group formed by ex-Confederates after the Civil War that terrorized black citizens and their supporters.
- **Madam C.J. Walker:** The founder of a hair product company for black women and the first self-made black female millionaire.
- **missionary:** A person sent to spread religion to new communities, particularly in other countries.
- **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP):** A civil rights organization that was founded in 1909 and still exists today.
- **National Youth Administration:** A New Deal agency that focused on providing work and education opportunities for Americans between the ages of 16 and 25.
- **New Deal:** President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's national program for stimulating the American economy during the Great Depression. Included employment, housing, and social service support systems.
- **Phillip Randolph:** An African American leader in the civil rights movement.
- **seminary:** A school that prepares students to be leaders in religious work.
- **vocational:** Relating to a specific occupation or type of employment.
- **Women's Army Corps:** The women's division of the United States Army, which was established in 1942.

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Discussion Questions

- How did Mary's childhood and early adulthood shape her career? Why did she choose education as the first focus of her activism?
- What challenges did Mary face in opening her school? How did she overcome these challenges? What does this say about her personality?
- Mary believed it was important to be an activist both for women of all races and for all black Americans regardless of gender. Why is this distinction important? What does it say about the experiences of black women?
- How did Mary's friendship with Eleanor Roosevelt shape her life?
- Examine the photograph of Mary's memorial in Washington, D.C. What do you see? What does it say about Mary's career and ideals?

Suggested Activities

- Mary was part of a vast network of women involved in New Deal policies and work. Compare her life story with those of Dorothea Lange and Ellen Woodward.
- Mary's life was very similar to that of Mary Church Terrell. Compare their life stories and consider how each woman fought for the rights of African Americans.
- Mary was not the only woman of color to struggle with the balance of women's rights and black rights. Combine this life story with that of Pauli Murray, who coined the term "Jane Crow."
- Mary had a successful career as an educator in the Progressive Era before her work during the Great Depression. Combine her story with resources from *Modernizing America, 1889–1920.*

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Themes

ACTIVISM, BLACK EXPERIENCES, EDUCATION, GREAT MIGRATION, JIM CROW, LAW & LEGAL STATUS, POLITICS & GOVERNMENT, NEW DEAL, RACE & RACISM, SOCIAL REFORM, WORK, WAR, GREAT DEPRESSION

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RESOURCE:

Life Story: Emma Tenayuca (1916–1999)

Emma Tenayuca in Bexar County Jail

Emma Tenayuca in Bexar County Jail, June 29, 1937. Courtesy, UTSA Special Collections.

Emma Tenayuca speaking to crowd outside San Antonio City Hall

Workers Alliance leader Emma Tenayuca speaking to crowd outside San Antonio City Hall, March 8, 1937. Courtesy, UTSA Special Collections.

Emma Tenayuca was born on December 21, 1916 in San Antonio, Texas. She was the oldest of her parents' eleven children. Emma's maternal grandparents encouraged her to take an interest in politics. They were both registered voters who debated local and state politics at home. Because of their influence, Emma paid attention to the world. She heard activists speaking in San Antonio's public squares, read Spanish-language newspapers, and took notice when more and more workers lost their jobs in the wake of the economic depression.

Emma quickly noticed a pattern. The darker a person's skin, the more he or she seemed to struggle. A common language did not unite San Antonio's Spanish-speaking population. Rather, divisions existed based on economic status, skin tone, and heritage. Even her own family was divided. Emma's mother's family traced their heritage to Spanish colonizers who owned land in East Texas for generations. Emma's father's family was descended from the Native people of the region. Emma often noticed that her parents saw the world differently.

As a high school freshman, Emma joined the League of United Latin American Citizens. She was frustrated that the organization represented the same divides she witnessed at home. The group promoted assimilation with mainstream white American society, something with which Emma strongly disagreed. Emma realized that the league was eager to have her as a member because she was a light-skinned Latina with Spanish colonial ancestry. She believed there had to be another way.

When Emma was a high school junior, the all-women staff of the Finck Cigar Company went on strike to protest low wages. Emma was moved by their demand for justice and joined the picket line. When police broke up the picket, she was arrested. One year later, she graduated high school. Emma was not necessarily interested in becoming an activist or leader, but she knew that she had to fight the social injustices of the world.

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In 1935, she joined the Young Communist League. The next year she joined the Communist Party. In the mid-1930s, the Communist Party took a new political position as popular opinion began to turn vehemently against the party. It attempted to build alliances with liberals and New Deal supporters. It welcomed people of all races and supported Franklin Roosevelt's presidency. The party's leaders argued that the New Deal provided necessary regulations and protections for hard-working Americans.

Emma's involvement in Communist Party activities led her to join the Workers Alliance of America, a group dedicated to supporting laborers, particularly those unemployed during the Depression. By 1937, she was on their executive committee. In this role, she organized strikes, letter-writing campaigns, and other protests. Emma was often arrested for her activities and received regular threats from anti-labor activists.

Emma and her colleagues believed San Antonio was full of laborers in need of organizing. One of the largest groups in need of help was the pecan shellers union. In the 1930s, 40 percent of the nation's pecans were shelled in Texas. Half of the pecan facilities were around San Antonio. Conditions in pecan shelling factories were horrifying. Rooms were severely overcrowded, with only one bathroom and poor ventilation. Pecan shellers, who were mostly women, suffered higher rates of tuberculosis and blamed their poor health on the work conditions.

On January 31, 1938, 12,000 pecan shellers went on strike to protest low wages and deplorable working conditions. Emma took on a leadership role in the strike through her work with the Workers Alliance of America. She spoke on behalf of the strikers and rallied workers on picket lines.

The strikers faced strong opposition. Over 1,000 strikers were arrested during the three-month strike. Local newspapers favored the interests of big business and portrayed Emma as a dangerous radical. Instead of focusing on the strikers' demands

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for living wages and social justice, most articles talked about Emma and her Communist ties. Other leaders of the strike asked Emma to step out of the spotlight. She brought on too much negative attention.

Emma stayed involved, but from behind the scenes. Her work contributed to a positive outcome. Pecan shellers earned a wage increase. But the industry invested in more machines a few years later and many workers lost their jobs.

In 1938, Emma married Homer Brooks, a well-known leader of the Community Party who once ran for governor of Texas. Emma and Homer were a Communist power couple. They appeared in public together and co-wrote essays. They both believed in unity among the races, and their marriage (Homer was white) represented this. They also favored organized labor and supported FDR’s policies supporting workers. Through their combined efforts, both Emma and Homer rose in the party. Emma eventually took on the role of chairperson of the Texas State Committee of the Communist Party.

Emma took on a leadership role in the strike through her work with the Workers Alliance of America.

On August 25, 1939, Homer, Emma, and a colleague hosted a party meeting in the Municipal Building of San Antonio. Emma was against meeting in such a public place.

Communist Russia recently aligned with Nazi Germany, increasing anti-Communist attitudes in the United States. But Homer did not want to back down. They had a permit from the mayor, who stated the Communist Party had the right to assemble in a public building.

Word of the mayor's beliefs spread. 5,000 anti-Communist protestors assembled outside the building. Inside, Emma and Homer opened the meeting by singing the national anthem. When the crowd outside heard 150 Communists singing "The Star Spangled Banner," they were furious. They threw rocks at the police stationed outside and forced their way inside. But the meeting room was empty. The attendees, including Homer and Emma, escaped through a secret passage under the building. Anti-Communists destroyed the room and held an "Americanism" rally, during which they denounced all Communists and the mayor, whom they burned in effigy. In the days that followed, Emma received many death threats.

Emma fled San Antonio for Houston, where she worked in a series of office jobs to make money. She occasionally participated in Communist Party activities on a smaller scale. She and Homer divorced in 1941.

The early 1940s were a stressful time for Emma, but she did not know that there was a looming threat following her. Although Emma was less involved in politics, the FBI watched her. They kept a massive file on Emma and her associates. Undercover agents attended meetings where she was present, eavesdropped on her conversations, and interviewed former colleagues and friends. Emma appeared on lists of enemies to the federal government.

In 1942, Emma applied to serve in the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps. Her application was denied. Although she never received a reason, her FBI file likely blacklisted her from government service.

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Emma moved to California in 1945 and ended her membership in the Communist Party shortly after that. Although she still believed in social justice and racial unity, the war and other factors pushed her away from organized politics.

Emma went back to school and completed her undergraduate degree at San Francisco State University. She began a teaching career, which she continued after returning to San Antonio in 1968. She retired in 1982.

Although Emma was no longer a public figure, she found ways to remain politically involved. She mentored students who expressed an interest in activism and encouraged them to study American labor history.

Emma died on July 23, 1999 in San Antonio. The Tejano community honored her and described her "La Pasionaria de Texas"—the passionflower of Texas.

Vocabulary

- **blacklisted:** Placed on a list of people who cannot be trusted.
- **communism:** A political system in which all goods and items of value are collectively owned and distributed to citizens equally.
- **Communist Party:** A political party that seeks to achieve the social and economic goals of communism.
- **effigy:** A sculpture or model of a person, often made to be destroyed as a form of protest.
- **municipal:** Related to a city.
- **Tejano:** Someone of Hispanic heritage from Texas.

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Discussion Questions

- How were Emma's political views shaped by her childhood and family heritage?
- Why was Emma drawn to the Communist Party? What were some of her key ideals?
- Why was Emma asked to step down from leading the pecan shellers' strike? What does this say about the intersection of organized labor, politics, and popular opinion? What does it say about gender and the status of women in political movements?
- Why did Emma exile herself from high-profile political action? How did she continue to be involved?
- Why was the FBI so interested in Emma? How did that attention shape her life?

Suggested Activities

- Emma is part of a long history of female labor leaders. Compare her life story with those of Clara Lemlich and Ella May Wiggins. How was her life different, particularly given that she was not an industrial worker, but an outside organizer?
- The Communist Party was a growing presence in 1920s–1930s America. Connect Emma's story to that of other women activists associated with the Communist Party, including Ella May Wiggins and militant housewives.

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- Emma witnessed firsthand the complications of Mexican American life in Texas. Study the challenges of the Latinx community by pairing her life story with that of Jovita Idar and the newspaper articles about El Paso laundry workers.

Themes

ACTIVISM, GREAT DEPRESSION, IMMIGRATION, LATINX EXPERIENCES, LAW & LEGAL STATUS, NEW DEAL, POLITICS & GOVERNMENT, ORGANIZED LABOR, RACE & RACISM, SOCIAL REFORM, WORK, RED SCARE

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