

## Introduction

### *The Quest for Racial Equality in Phoenix*

ON FRIDAY, JUNE 16, 1995, amid blistering desert heat of over 100 degrees, scores of ordinary citizens and some of the most influential leaders in Phoenix, Arizona, and across the nation gathered to celebrate the life and mourn the loss of Dr. Lincoln Johnson Ragsdale Sr., one of the city's wealthiest and most dynamic leaders. They assembled at the Universal Memorial Chapel at 1100 East Jefferson Street, a location that once stood at the bustling epicenter of the African American community in Phoenix. Among the many who braved the torrid heat to pay their respects to Ragsdale's widow, Eleanor Dickey Ragsdale, and the rest of the Ragsdale family were some of the most celebrated African American leaders in the nation. Leon Sullivan, a close friend and a key figure in the anti-apartheid movement and the founder of Opportunities Industrialization Centers (OIC), International Foundation of Education and Self-Help (IFESH), and Progress Non-profit Charitable Trust, was on hand to deliver Ragsdale's eulogy. Earl Graves, the millionaire publisher of *Black Enterprise Magazine*, was present to give tribute. Local civil rights legends Clovis Campbell Sr., George B. Brooks, Herbert L. Ely, and the Reverend Warren H. Stewart, among others, also came to say good-bye to their confidant and fellow activist.<sup>1</sup>

The distinguished congregation that amassed in downtown Phoenix that day did so to honor one of most commanding and compelling individuals in Phoenix's history. Indeed, Lincoln Ragsdale was among the first African Americans to be trained as a combat pilot during World War II, an extremely successful mortician and businessman

in a city that afforded black men and women very little economic upward mobility, and a key leader of the post–World War II black freedom struggle in Arizona. Although Ragsdale’s wealth and business acumen were routinely noted in the Phoenix media by the end of his life, he was an activist at his core, the quintessential “race man.” That is to say that Ragsdale devoted much of his time, training, work, and resources to the reclamation and social, economic, political, and cultural advancement of people of African descent. This, he believed, was his calling and responsibility—to help reconfigure American society into one that would provide black people with the opportunity to maximize their own potential and succeed or fail by their own merits. “I am a crusader for racial justice,” he declared just before he died, “and I will be to the day I die.”<sup>2</sup>

On Thursday, May 14, 1998, just three years after Lincoln Ragsdale passed away, Eleanor Dickey Ragsdale was honored at her funeral at the Universal Memorial Chapel. The chapel, owned and operated by the Ragsdale family since 1945, was and is in many ways a reflection of Eleanor Ragsdale’s warm, elegant, and cultured persona. As an equally distinguished cast of characters descended upon the chapel to attend her memorial services, including Sullivan and many of the dignitaries who attended Lincoln’s funeral, they were greeted by rare paintings that adorned the complex’s walls and by precious sculptures and busts that were carefully placed throughout the foyer, adjacent offices, and sanctuary. The illustrious gathering came not simply to salute the deceased wife of one the region’s most celebrated leaders, they did so to honor someone who was an eminent figure in her own right. Eleanor Ragsdale was a graduate of Cheyney University in Pennsylvania, the oldest historically black college and university in the nation, an accomplished educator, an effective businesswoman, and a formidable civil rights leader. Like her husband, Eleanor, though well known by many as an affluent socialite, earned her local celebrity by positioning herself early on as a civil rights pioneer and advocate for black culture and community. She was a classic “race woman.” Eleanor was wholly committed to the social, economic, political, and cultural betterment of people of African descent. Like Lincoln, she believed that this was not only her purpose but her duty. She, too, was devoted to eradicating racism and “uplifting” people of African descent who suffered from the exigencies of socioeconomic subordination and cultural deprivation.<sup>3</sup>

Lincoln and Eleanor Ragsdale, as black professional people, believed that it was their responsibility to aid in the advancement of people of African descent who were less fortunate than they were. They acquired their devotion to this ethic of “race work” undergirded by professional pursuits through familial and community traditions. Lincoln was a third-generation mortician and entrepreneur, and Eleanor was a third-generation educator and business owner. African Americans have had a long history of producing and sustaining professional leaders who have, in turn, redistributed their social and economic capital in black communities. A vital aspect of this black professional tradition called for African American communities to support the career specialists they helped produce, as long as these professionals distinguished themselves as advocates for black people. This practice was intended to, among other things, ensure the long-term survival and advancement of African Americans in a society that offered little, if any, meaningful and sustained outside assistance. This legacy equipped the Ragsdales with motivation to prosper. It also enveloped them with high hopes from a larger black community that expected them to aid in their betterment.<sup>4</sup>

Eleanor’s status as a professional “race woman” differed from Lincoln’s position as a professional “race man” by virtue of her substantive commitment to gender equality. She understood that the fight for black liberation necessarily required a parallel if not intertwined struggle for gender equality. For Eleanor, being a “race woman,” or engaging in race work, never meant sacrificing her commitment to gender equality. Although she willingly and strategically subordinated gender issues to racial issues at times or sometimes fought for racial equality and gender equality independently, she always understood, even as many of her black male peers could or would not, that advocating for the advancement of black people, or “the race,” meant working for the enrichment of black men and women. Together, Lincoln and Eleanor Ragsdale crusaded for racial and gender equality for fifty years. Lincoln and Eleanor Ragsdale’s all-encompassing commitment to black progress and prosperity in postwar Phoenix helped make him the city’s leading “race man” and her its leading “race woman.” These labels, and their importance in Phoenix, grew out of their long-term devotion to the work to which they had set their hands—their efforts to liberate people of African descent from the web of white supremacy, their race work.<sup>5</sup>

Nearly fifty years before the death of Lincoln Ragsdale, he and Eleanor descended upon Phoenix, an isolated, somewhat desolate, and entirely racially segregated city, in search of freedom and opportunity. Few would have imagined that their migration would ultimately help transform an entire city and, ostensibly, a nation forever. Between 1945 and 1995, fired with a passion for racial equality, Lincoln and Eleanor Ragsdale drew upon an arsenal of social justice weapons in the battle for civil rights in Phoenix. They helped dismantle an apartheid-like system in what is presently the fifth largest city in the United States. The Ragsdales and other western activists, though geographically isolated from the civil rights movement in the American South, were not strangers to white supremacy and black resistance. They were roused by years of racial discrimination, World War II, and America's promise of democracy and were sustained by a swelling African American population. They were also buoyed by the burgeoning postwar liberalism of a number of white western leaders. Armed with their experiences, hope, and passion, and aided by sympathetic white Phoenicians, the Ragsdales led the way in securing victories for racial justice in Phoenix, sometimes in advance of national milestones in civil rights.<sup>6</sup>

Between 1945 and 1995 America's black freedom struggle peaked, and many African Americans made social, economic, and political gains as a result of the civil rights movement and its legacy. Through an aggressive coalition of organizations, activists fought *de jure* and *de facto* racial segregation. They attacked segregation in the courts and through direct-action protests such as sit-ins, boycotts, and other forms of civil disobedience. In the face of this onslaught, and despite persistent white resistance, legal segregation and disfranchisement collapsed. Although racism remained and African Americans lagged behind their white counterparts economically and politically, blacks experienced unprecedented improvements in their socioeconomic mobility.<sup>7</sup>

The Phoenician movement and activism throughout the West, as Quintard Taylor Jr. has argued, "paralleled the movement East of the Mississippi with regard to strategy, tactics, and objectives." Nevertheless, the western movement took place in an environment where black people were often not the largest minority. In Phoenix, due to the city's small African American population, black leaders were compelled to form alliances with progressive whites and Mexican Americans. As a

result, the multiracial coalitions that were formed “pushed civil rights beyond black and white.” The diversity of these alliances infused the Phoenician movement with a level of social capital, economic strength, and optimism that rarely existed in the South or even in the Northwest. The optimism and determination of the Ragsdales, and that of other activists, produced many of the region’s early civil rights victories. As early as 1951, white Phoenician attorney and civil rights activist William Mahoney proclaimed that “the die is cast in the South or in an old city like New York or Chicago, but we here [in Phoenix] are present for creation. We’re making a society where the die isn’t cast. It can be for good or ill.”<sup>8</sup>

Although white supremacy and racial segregation existed in Phoenix from its birth, the city’s racial etiquette was less violent than that found in southern cities. “The difference [in Phoenix],” argued John Barber, an early black Phoenician, “was that they didn’t lynch you.” The Ragsdales and other activists therefore believed that Phoenix held the potential to be more responsive than its southern counterparts to calls for racial justice. Their assessment of the city’s racial etiquette was sustained and productive. Indeed, in 1953 Eleanor Ragsdale played a leading role in desegregating Phoenix’s Encanto District, the city’s most affluent and racially segregated neighborhood. Also in 1953, the Ragsdales helped desegregate Phoenix schools one year before the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954. Lincoln Ragsdale, along with black activist George Brooks, led the way in desegregating many of Phoenix’s most influential corporations as early as 1962, the same year James Meredith desegregated the University of Mississippi with federal support and two years before the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission was established. In 1963, the same year that Medgar Evers was assassinated in Mississippi for his attempt to rally support for racial justice, Lincoln Ragsdale positioned himself as one of the cornerstones of a political campaign that wrested Phoenix city government out of the hands of an elite group of conservative white men. Lincoln and Eleanor Ragsdale fought for proportional allocation of government contracts to minority-owned businesses during the 1970s, and by the 1990s they were aiding in the nationally recognized, hard-fought campaign to establish Martin Luther King Jr. Day as a paid holiday in Arizona. Throughout all of their efforts, the Ragsdales were clever and potent, and their history

demonstrates that no lacuna in effective African American leadership existed in Phoenix.<sup>9</sup>

This study examines the Ragsdale family history and how their familial traditions of entrepreneurship, professionalism, activism, and race work served to form their activist identity and ultimately placed them in a position to help desegregate Phoenix. It also underscores the ability of the Ragsdales and their peers to capitalize on the success of the movement. By 1998 the Ragsdales and their allies had worked to improve race relations in Phoenix, and people of African descent generally benefited from greater socioeconomic opportunities. The Ragsdales, by virtue of their activism and faithful devotion to racial inclusion, are also credited with helping to initiate the city's surging interest in diversity and multiculturalism. *Race Work* uses the lives of the Ragsdales to frame, view, and pursue themes of domination, resistance, interracial coalition building, race, gender, and place against the backdrop of the civil rights and post-civil rights eras.<sup>10</sup>

Although it focuses on flamboyant characters, the book is not merely a study of their lives. It is, in essence, an integrated biography that analyzes African Americans' quest for freedom in Phoenix, the degree to which they attained it, and their drive to give that freedom meaning. Thus this work concentrates on "making history and biography reinforce each other," as the lives of the Ragsdales are powerful symbols of black leadership, professionalism, entrepreneurship, activism, problems, and progress in African American history, American western history, and American history in general during the post-World War II era.<sup>11</sup> *Race Work* also endeavors to situate the black Phoenician struggle for freedom and equality in the larger framework of a regional history that defines the West as a place rather than a process. Ultimately, the purpose of this work is to present a new chapter in the history of the civil rights movement, American race relations, African Americans, and the American West. The lives and legacies of Lincoln and Eleanor Ragsdale stand at the center of this heretofore unwritten history.<sup>12</sup>

Like African Americans throughout the nation, black Phoenicians, led by activists such as the Ragsdales, organized to confront virtually all aspects of segregation between 1946 and 1965. Furthermore, between 1965 and 1998 the Ragsdales and their supporters fought to make further advances in education, job training, political representation, socioeconomic mobility, and racial diversity in the public

and private sectors. Black Phoenicians rarely received support and attention from the leaders of the national movement and were left largely to their own devices to battle racism and white supremacy. The black freedom struggle benefited greatly from the courage, audacity, and creativity of local leaders like the Ragsdales. Endowed with these character traits, in addition to ambition and keen intellects, Lincoln and Eleanor Ragsdale redefined black leadership and respectability in Phoenix. Their ability to combat white supremacy and negotiate economic, legal, and political reform was unprecedented in the city.<sup>13</sup>

Prominent Phoenix attorney and fellow activist Herbert Ely argues that one “cannot emphasize enough” the importance of Lincoln Ragsdale. As an intelligent, well-spoken black crusader for equal rights, “Lincoln did things that had never been done in Phoenix,” he maintains. “Lincoln was fearless. He always had a demeanor about him and a stature about him, and he made people understand that he was a business man. He wanted them to understand that he could compete with them at their level, and he was absolutely successful in that.” George Brooks has declared that all races, ethnicities, and religions in Phoenix “owe Lincoln Ragsdale a debt of gratitude that they do not have enough time to pay.” Brooks argues that Lincoln, aided by Eleanor, helped lead the effort that established a legal precedent for the desegregation of America’s schools, and as a result, the two helped make “Phoenix and all American cities [more] inclusive cities.” “Without him,” he asserts, Phoenix, and perhaps the nation, “would still be on its way.”<sup>14</sup>

The Ragsdales’ history, their personal achievements, and the social and economic advances they helped bring to Phoenix rival most stories of professional activism in post-World War II America. Like Andrew Manis in *“A Fire You Can’t Put Out”: The Civil Rights Life of Birmingham’s Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth*, I admit that I am sympathetic to the Ragsdales as people and to their positions as leaders of a significant local movement with national implications. Like Manis, I believe that “no historian is free of bias.” Historian Peter Novic captured the complexity of objectivity well when he likened it to “nailing jelly to the wall.” Despite the difficulties associated with neutrality, historians can be evenhanded in their analysis. I have endeavored to be fair yet critical in my examination of the Ragsdales. To this end, *Race Work* confronts multiple tensions within the Ragsdale family, including frictions that stemmed from Lincoln’s authoritarian persona and

his tendency to privilege work and service over spending time with his family, particularly with his children. The book will also illuminate the disquiet that emerged as a by-product of the African American community's needs and expectations vis-à-vis the Ragsdales' status as an elite black family. It will examine other strains as well, including the uneasy relationship between upstart and more seasoned activists, traditionalists and militants, male and female leaders, and African Americans and Mexican Americans in Phoenix.<sup>15</sup>

Black Phoenicians have never been the largest "minority" in the city. Although Phoenix had few "original-entry ethnic enclaves," Mexican Americans are perhaps the only minority group present in substantive numbers from the city's birth in 1870. They quickly became the largest racial minority in Phoenix, and as early as World War II, the number of Mexican Americans greatly exceeded the number of African Americans in the city. Like African Americans, Mexican Americans have struggled against white supremacy. Seldom, however, have these groups formed multiracial coalitions that stood in opposition to racial oppression. Ironically, multiracial coalition building in Phoenix was practiced primarily by blacks and progressive whites. Necessarily, therefore, this book offers a critical analysis of the relationship between African Americans and Mexican Americans and between African Americans and white Americans in the struggle for racial equality. Lincoln and Eleanor Ragsdale, particularly in the final years of their lives, championed greater interaction among Chicanos and African Americans. Lincoln Ragsdale, in fact, was a member of a relatively small group of local leaders who chose to do so. The Ragsdales demonstrated early on that they understood the American West, especially the Southwest, to be a harbinger for a new racial dynamic that would eventually engulf the entire nation. They knew that as the Chicano and Latino majority grew and the proportion of the African American population declined, black people would have to devise new ways of successfully negotiating the challenges of racial and ethnic divisions. *Race Work* portrays the Southwest as being something of a meeting ground between the cultures of the Old South and Mexico and examines how African Americans, by virtue of their small numbers, were obligated to devise unique survival strategies, which included substantial coalition building, to advance in this dissimilar racial order.<sup>16</sup>

Like many local leaders who greatly influenced the course of the

African American freedom struggle, the Ragsdales' history has been overshadowed by the more noted legacies of postwar leaders such as Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X (El Hajj Malik El Shabazz). Lincoln and Eleanor Ragsdale, however, are among the most unsung of the leading protagonists of the American civil rights movement. Without the support of Lincoln and Eleanor Ragsdale, Phoenix's high schools may not have been desegregated in 1953, and its elementary schools would not have been desegregated early in 1954 (before *Brown*). The U.S. Supreme Court may not have been able to use the Phoenix ruling as a precedent in the *Brown* ruling of 1954, and arguably the first landmark victory of the civil rights movement might have been postponed for quite some time and America's schools desegregated much later. This alone makes the Ragsdales' story worthy of inquiry. Moreover, their story is an irrepressible drama that I have strived to reveal and interpret with clarity and balance.<sup>17</sup>

Relatively few historians have written about local "race men" and "race women" in the American West, particularly the Southwest. Generally, the study of the history of African Americans in the post-World War II American West has garnered little attention. The absence of a substantial body of literature has left a scholarly vacuum in the field of black western history, which has played a key role in cloaking the history of highly influential local leaders such as the Ragsdales.<sup>18</sup>

The American West has long been narrowly labeled as a region with few if any African Americans and virtually no black history. This obscures the diverse nature of the western United States. Until the 1960s, academic and popular views of the American West were dominated by the work of historian Frederick Jackson Turner. He posited that rugged Anglo American pioneers, fighting to subdue an ever-expanding western frontier, ushered in the taming of the wilderness, civilization, and a process of self-redefinition. The "Turner thesis" argued that this process produced what we now consider to be "Americans," an egalitarian people who champion democratic values that continue to shape the United States.<sup>19</sup> This thesis embraced stereotypes already rooted in American popular culture: pious pioneers, tough outlaws, barbaric Indians, chivalrous white men, and virtuous white women. It was eventually reinforced by western paintings, novels, and, most important, movies and television programs that cemented into American consciousness, as no historical work

could, the image of white settlers as “conquerors who superimposed their will on a vast, virtually uninhabited virgin land.” In this interpretation, “African Americans were not considered an indigenous group, and they were not conquerors.” Black people, therefore, “had no place in the region’s historical saga”<sup>20</sup>

Seeking to fill this lacuna and advance interpretive analyses that illuminate not only black history but American western history, many scholars have opened new doors leading to the development of a more inclusive and sophisticated American history.<sup>21</sup> They have done so by examining the special experiences of arguably one of the American West’s most marginalized minorities. Contrary to a once widely held belief that the American West is defined by its being devoid of, among other things, “Negroes,” African Americans have always been, despite their relatively small numbers, a fundamental piece of the social, economic, and political fabric that is the West, particularly the urban West. Beginning in 1528 with the arrival of the Moroccan Esteban de Dorantes in Texas, the first of many Spanish-speaking blacks, African Americans were populating the region. By 1880 the earliest English-speaking blacks had moved west as slaves, free farmers, fur trappers, or servants, creating the nucleus of post-Civil War communities. Thousands of African Americans later migrated to the high plains, while others, such as the legendary Nat Love, drove cattle up the Chisholm Trail or served on remote army outposts. By the 1900s black westerners had been a part of the region for nearly four hundred years.<sup>22</sup>

Above all, the history of African Americans in the West is a story of urban life and “the struggle for racial equality,” for black Americans in the West have lived primarily in cities that discriminated against, subjugated, and sometimes terrorized them. Reflecting this fact, it is important to give substantive attention to the twentieth-century black West. Indeed, World Wars I and II, as well as the industries that were created to support them, greatly improved the prospect of good jobs and a freer life for African Americans in the West. Black populations in the western United States increased tenfold as a result of this wave of migration. This movement brought highly influential leaders such as the Ragsdales to western cities like Phoenix. The influx of black professional people helped intensify the region’s civil rights movement, and this heightened agitation eventually paved the way