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Challenger and Nurturer: Wisconsin Civil Rights Pioneer James Cameron (1914-2006)

By David J. Marcou.

Wisconsin has long been a place of both challenge and nurture, and a diversity of peoples has settled in this state. African Americans, to name one group, have found the Badger State to be sometimes difficult, but also sublime – from runaway slave Joshua Glover, whose case was taken up by the U.S. Supreme Court; to former Wisconsin Secretary of State Vel Phillips, the first black constitutional officer in this state; to NFL Hall of Famer and Christian Minister Reggie White, who helped lead the Green Bay Packers to an NFL championship, the list of key figures is impressive. Wisconsinites of all colors and backgrounds have taken on those twin characteristics themselves, becoming both challengers and nurturers.

In western Wisconsin, La Crosse has always had a small African American population, but two among that group achieved national prominence early on. In politics, George Edwin Taylor published his *Wisconsin Labor Advocate* there, and became the first African American party candidate for U.S. president, in 1904. In athletics, George Coleman Poage graduated from La Crosse High School and UW-Madison, and became the first African American Olympic medalist, also in 1904, in two hurdles events. However, it has just been since the death of James Herbert Cameron Jr. in June 2006 that people began to realize the longtime Milwaukee civil rights leader was born in La Crosse, and thus was a native-born Wisconsinite.(1)

It has become clear through much research that James Cameron Jr.'s family history began in this state considerably before his birth. His paternal grandfather was Blake Cameron, a stone mason, who lived in Sparta, in Monroe County, from the end of the Civil War until his death in 1904.(2) Blake and his wife, Amanda, had eight living children, from 12 born, including "Herbert," or James H. Cameron Sr. James Jr.'s maternal grandparents, Jerry and India Carter, lived in Indiana when their daughter Vera married Herbert.

In 1910, the Herbert and Vera Camerons lived in Champaign, Illinois, where Herbert's mother had relocated after Blake's death.(3) Herbert and Vera moved to La Crosse by 1913, perhaps due to the proximity of siblings in nearby Sparta, and the strong African American barbering businesses in the city, during the relative zenith of African American population in La Crosse.(4) In various documents, James Sr.'s occupation was given as porter or barber at La Crosse's grand Stoddard Hotel.(5)

Pioneers in early La Crosse included the pre-Civil War, free-black Moss Family, some of whom worked as barbers, who assisted other blacks in migrating there. Herbert worked as a barber with a John Moss in Champaign; and John may have been related to the La Crosse Mosses. Even after most black families had left La Crosse by the 1920s, Orby Moss and his family still ran a barbershop one block away from young Cameron's birth place, on Mill Street.

La Crosse's early logging-driven economy had become more service-oriented by 1910. By February 1914, James Sr., his wife Vera, and daughter Marie lived in a "rambling shack" on the 400 block of Mill Street, now Copeland Avenue. Mill Street was adjacent to railroad lines that brought in people who needed barbering and other personal caretaking, which is one reason why the Mosses located so close to the north side train depot, and given the possibility of a key connection between the Mosses and the Camerons previously, why the Camerons lived but one block away from them.(6)

In any case, the temperature was 25 degrees below zero, and on February 25, 1914, James Jr. came into the world weighing 10 pounds, as Mrs. Marilyn Brown and Mrs. Ostrowski assisted Dr. John Callahan and

Mrs. Cameron. Mrs. Brown, a white woman married to a black man, prepared breakfast. James Sr. wanted to help, and was asked to watch four-year-old Marie in the kitchen.(7)

Time passed, and at 15 months of age, after bouts with pneumonia and whooping cough, James Jr. developed a bowel obstruction. Dr. Callahan operated on him at St. Francis Hospital, and saved his life in a tricky operation, given Cameron also had an enflamed appendix to be removed then. Cameron relates: "I had been the first Black baby ever admitted as a patient in the Saint Francis Hospital. Visitors who came to visit with their relatives and friends ended up coming past my room to visit me, too. A whole roomful of toys was accumulated from these people."(8) Young Cameron may have been something of a patient-curiosity then, but visitors treated him and his family well.

The young family soon moved to Marion, Indiana, then Alabama, then back to Marion. Along the way, Herbert and Vera separated, then divorced. By the time he was 16, James Jr. associated with a tough crowd. He was tempted to mischief on more than one occasion. Then, on the night of August 6, 1930, Tommy Shipp, Abe Smith, and Cameron robbed a white couple on Lover's Lane, Claude Deeter and Mary Ball. Deeter recognized one of the teens, probably Cameron, who used to shine his shoes. Deeter was shot, then clubbed in the head, and died soon after. Cameron claimed he fled when the gun came out, and heard shots blocks away.

The three boys were arrested, and a throng broke into the Grant County Jail the next night, lynching Shipp and Smith. A white policeman, Charles Truex, saved Cameron, saying he'd been jailed for catching a free ride on a freight-train. Cameron was later found guilty in Deeter's death, and imprisoned for four years. No one was convicted for the lynching; Cameron ever-after thought the Klan was behind it. Still, after four years of confinement and reflection, Cameron emerged from prison, reformed, "I was now a young man, 21 years of age, who had time to pick up the loose ends of his life and weave them into something beautiful, worthwhile, and God-like."

Soon enough, he established four NAACP chapters and became Indiana's Civil Liberties Director, keen evidence of a salvaged life. But his family received death-threats, and Milwaukee offered work. After the family's move to Milwaukee, Cameron eventually opened a successful air-conditioning and refrigeration firm, and became Catholic, because he thought he'd heard the voice of the Virgin Mary the night he was saved from lynching. He provided for his family well, and they helped give him the certainty and freedom he needed.(9)

In 1963, Cameron joined Martin Luther King Jr. for his nonviolent march on Washington, D.C., where King gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. Then, in 1967, Cameron joined Fr. James Groppi to protest housing segregation in Milwaukee; that year marked the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement in that city. In the Fr. Groppi papers at the UW-Milwaukee Library Archives, supportive as well as hateful letters and cards were sent to Groppi. One card showed a photo of Martin Luther King Jr., other blacks, and the white Groppi, and was captioned, "COMMIES". But the majority of Americans were becoming exposed to the idea that blacks might actually be equal to whites, in the eyes of God, and the law, as well.

Later, in 1979, Cameron and his wife, Virginia, visited Israel's Holocaust Museum, which reminded him of the struggles blacks had gone through in America. He told Cynthia Carr: "It shook me up... I said to my wife, 'Honey, we need a museum like that in America...'"(10)

Cameron's dream, America's Black Holocaust Museum, became reality. With \$5,000 of his own money he opened the museum in 1988 on the second floor of Milwaukee's Black Muslim headquarters, then moved it to a storefront around the corner. And yet, he didn't have room to exhibit more than ten photos or to store many of his ten thousand books on civil rights. As Cynthia Carr writes, "And to his utter frustration, he would go for days without a single person coming in."(11)

He felt an especial responsibility, though, as the key surviving near-victim of a lynching, so Cameron persisted, and moved into an old gym at 2233 N. Fourth Street in Milwaukee. Sponsors signed on, and his building was remodeled. Carr compared visits in 2003: “It was almost startling to remember how I found Cameron there in 1993, ensconced alone in one room stuffed with books and papers, while most of the space was just a big gym – all hoops, lockers, and ancient weightlifting equipment. That building was unrecognizable now. Glass doors opened into a lobby – administrative offices to the right, gift shop to the left. A small permanent exhibit on the Middle Passage led to the galleries.”(12) Depicted in the museum are six time periods: Before Captivity in Africa; the Middle Passage; Slavery in the Americas; Reconstruction; Civil Rights; and Modern Injustices. School and corporate interests visit today, and they come away with clearer ideas about what racial struggles and racial harmony consist of.(13)

Cameron fathered five decent children; but he also kept busy by visiting Indiana periodically to protest Klan rallies and push for the transfer of his museum to the Grant County Jail Building, where he’d once been an inmate. Marion had changed – with blacks in key leadership positions – including Grant County Sheriff Oatess Archey, the first black sheriff in Indiana. IU History Professor James H. Madison said, “Oatess Archey is very much aware of what James Cameron did for him – of what he did for justice and equality in America. James Cameron helped blacks like Oatess Archey come back in Marion.”(14)

The KKK may have helped prompt the Marion lynching, as Cameron believed. And Cameron knew the Klan even had influence in Wisconsin, though nowhere nearly as much as in Indiana. To be sure, he knew the struggle for civil rights would be a difficult one, no matter where he went in America.(15)

In 1993, Indiana Governor Evan Bayh granted Cameron a pardon in Deeter’s death. Then, on June 13, 2005, the U.S. Congress apologized for not enacting anti-lynching laws earlier, another longtime goal of Cameron’s. James Cameron received an Honorary Doctorate from UW-Milwaukee. He was also featured on many widely televised news programs and in the news media, including on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, the BBC, and in *Newsweek*. He died June 11, 2006, and is buried at Milwaukee’s Holy Cross Cemetery.(16)

U. S. Congresswoman Gwen Moore, of Milwaukee, said upon his death: “Dr. Cameron endeavored to... build a foundation for real unity.... The Black Holocaust Museum has helped both black AND white Americans.... Dr. Cameron... taught us to be better, not bitter... He believed that if Americans learned the truth about the racist events in our history, then we would have a better chance to relegate racism to the past. Dr. Cameron exemplifies the imperative of the civil rights struggle: the call to listen to our humanity over and above our fear.”(17)

A somewhat rough, challenging start in life for James Cameron Jr., had helped turn his thinking around, and he became a beacon of hope and nurture not only for black Americans, but for Americans of every color in the rainbow. From his incarceration: “I realized I had reached and passed beyond the crisis between light and darkness, between good and evil... This knowledge obligated me as a human being to return that love and kindness to someone along the way of life who would need it. It would be proof to them that they are members of the human race, that they, too, belong in our world....”(18)

Both challenger and nurturer, Wisconsin’s own James Herbert Cameron Jr. made a name for himself and for all tolerant peoples, and all Americans, all World Citizens, should be grateful.

David J. Marcou is a La Crosse-based writer, photographer, editor, and clerk who earned three university degrees, including in History from UW-Madison. His son, Matthew, is a UM-Minneapolis student majoring in Chemistry.

Endnotes:

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Society, the La Crosse County Historical Society, the UW-La Crosse Murphy Library Area Research Center, the Champaign County Historical Archives at the Urbana (Ill.) Free Library, the University of Indiana, and my other sources, too, plus the publisher of this article.-djm.

1) Cameron, James, *A Time of Terror*, Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1982, 97-102; <http://www.library.wisc.edu/etext/wireader/WER1124.html> -- Marcou, David J., Editor, *Spirit of Wisconsin: A Historical Photo-Essay of the Badger State*, Kalamazoo, MI: Speranza, 2005; the writer is indebted to Aquinas High School Archivist Richard Dungan for bringing the La Crosse-Cameron connection to his attention in March 2007; Carr, Cynthia, *Our Town: A Heartland Lynching, A Haunted Town, and the Hidden History of White America*, New York: Crown Publishing, 2006, pp. 15 and 462.

2) It takes hard, long research to discover new information on any historical figure who is somewhat guarded about their history. James Cameron Jr.'s early family photos, if they exist, seem impossible to find. Even his creation, America's Black Holocaust Museum in Milwaukee, does not own such photos. Also, he apparently left no information behind at his museum to indicate he ever traveled back to La Crosse after his family left there. However, he did write sufficiently on his own life to leave an enticing trail of places he ventured forth from and to, places where he intended others to take up the thread, to describe his ventures in fuller forms; "Recent Deaths," *Monroe County Democrat*, Aug. 5, 1904, p. 1.

3) *Champaign and Urbana, Illinois, City Directory, Containing ...* Bloomington, Ill.: Chas. M. Samson, 1910. James Cameron Sr. is listed as a barber working for F. J. Jordan.

4) UW-La Crosse Professor Emeritus Bruce Mouser writes that from the time La Crosse became a city in 1856 until 1906, about 445 African-Americans made their homes here. The total La Crosse population in 1855 was 1,637; and in 1910, 30,417, which means African-Americans were a significant but not large part of the city's population then. Mouser, *Black La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1850-1906: Settlers, Entrepreneurs, & Exodusters*, in *La Crosse County Historical Society Occasional Papers Series*, No. 1, 2002; blacks finally returned to La Crosse in increasing numbers from the 1980s on, drawn by greater economic, educational, and cultural opportunities. Total population numbers taken from La Crosse Public Library "Fast Facts" accessed April 26, 2007 <http://lpl.lacrosse.lib.wi.us:81/ipac20/ipac.jsp?session=1171944N57687.295&profile=main&uri=full=3100001~!41595~!2&ri=1&aspect=subtab14&menu=search&source=~!comres>

5) James H. Cameron (Sr.) wasn't listed in local city directories, pre-1913. The 1913 (Postal) City Directory lists as amendment J. H. Cameron at the Stoddard Hotel and Mrs. James Cameron at 2129 Vine Street. The latter address was occupied in 1915 by Mrs. Sophie Cameron, possibly a relative. The Ashley and Ellen Shivers family lived at 418 Mill and the Camerons were also listed there. Ellen Shivers owned that lot. No official records were found about the Ostrowskis; they may have been tenants between the Shivers' and the Camerons' houses, subletting to the Camerons. The memoir indicates the (white) Ostrowskis rented to the Camerons, and Mrs. Ostrowski assisted Callahan with Cameron's home-birth. But the 1915 directory varies from James's birth certificate -- the latter lists 408 Mill, not 418, as the Cameron home. Another address for James H. Cameron was 327 N. 6th (see scratch-out/entry in 1915 postal directory). -- (Postal) *La Crosse City Directory 1913*, amendment to p. 229; (Postal) *La Crosse City Directory 1915*; *U.S. Census, 1880*, La Crosse County, A483; *U.S. Census, 1930*, La Crosse County, Sheet 7B; Obituary for Sophie Cameron, *La Crosse Tribune*, July 13, 1952, p. 8; *Tax List of the City of La Crosse, 1914*, Spreadsheet 27; 1906 *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map(s) for the City of La Crosse, Wisconsin*, 1906 and 1944, Plate/s 67; Author's Interview with Anita Taylor Doering, La Crosse Public Library Archivist (also especially helpful in that Archives were Bill Petersen, Megan Isely, and Brian Hannum); Author's Phone Interviews with Bruce Mouser, April 3 and April 15, 2007; Cameron, p. 98.

6) Carr, p. 31; *Spirit of La Crosse*, p. 97; *Wright's Directory of La Crosse for 1915*, Milwaukee: Wright Directory Co., p. 210; your writer's parents knew the Orby Moss Family, and on February 14, 1950, the Mosses were among the guests at my parent's wedding reception; Robert C. Nesbit points out in *Wisconsin: A History* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1973, 1989, p. 196) that La Crosse, which at one time was the second largest city in Wisconsin, continued to have big-city ambitions. It had long been a transportation hub, with not only the railroads passing through, but, due to the confluence of three rivers there, including the Mississippi, riverboat traffic also brought many travelers through La Crosse. Thus, not only city residents, but also tourists and traveling entrepreneurs made use of personal caretaking services in that city.

7) Mouser, author of *Black La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1850-1906*, told your author that there were a lot of legal interracial marriages in early La Crosse, unlike Indiana, where interracial marriage was illegal until 1965; Cameron, p. 97-101; La Crosse County Register of Deeds, Birth Certificate for James Cameron, DOB: February 25, 1914.

8) Cameron, pp. 101-102; unfortunately, St. Francis Hospital's 2007 staff could find no records for young James's stay there, partly because they said records were sketchily-kept in those days.

9) Cameron, including p. 193; Carr, p. 161.

10) http://www.thehypertexts.com/Mysterious_Ways/Mysterious_Ways_Lynching_of_James_Cameron.htm -- Carr, p. 23; "The 40th Anniversary of Milwaukee's Civil Rights Movement," *The Historian, A publication for the members and friends of Wisconsin Black Historical Society/Museum*, Spring Edition, p.1; from the 1967 Folders, *The Correspondence of Fr. James Groppi*, Held by the UW-Milwaukee Library Archives; *America's Black Holocaust Museum*.

11) Carr, pp. 23-24: *America's Black Holocaust Museum*.

12) Carr, p. 453; *America's Black Holocaust Museum*.

13) *America's Black Holocaust Museum*.

14) Carr, pp. 396-401. Madison, James H., *A Lynching in the Heartland: Race and Memory in America*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000; Author's Phone Interview with Prof. Madison, April 4, 2007; Archey had been a star student-athlete in Marion, who then graduated from Grambling University. When he returned to Marion, the only job he could find was as a school janitor. He persisted, though, became a teacher and coach, and eventually worked for the FBI. In fact, he took the call for the Bureau the day President Reagan was shot. Cameron and Archey talked many times over the years, and the memory of Marion's lynching motivated both men to persist in their work.

15) Founded in 1866, the KKK first appeared in Wisconsin in 1920. Mouser said the rise of Wisconsin's Klan may have prompted the move of many African Americans out of La Crosse by the 1920s, along with new industries replacing old, and an influx of immigrant-groups bringing new workers for jobs blacks previously filled. The Wisconsin KKK was in decline by 1930, but simultaneously with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, it became revitalized again. Its rally in Janesville, Wisconsin, in 1992, drew on-site protests from Cameron. He often said at these protests that the KKK should allow white people who believe in civil rights to breathe fresh air with black people, wherever they go. That sentiment has carried the day more often than not in America since the passage of the U.S. Civil Rights Laws of 1964-65. In recent months, though, the national Klan is reported to be involved in anti-Hispanic activities, prompted by the outcry for immigration reform in the Congress. The struggle for all Americans, all peoples, to be free, continues. <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/dictionary/index.asp> (Ku Klux Klan) -- *The History of Wisconsin*, vol. 5; Goldberg,, Robert A., "The Ku Klux Klan in Madison, 1922-1927," in *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 58 (Autumn, 1974); Author's Phone Interview with Bruce Mouser, April 3, 2007; "500 Members in La Crosse, Is Claim of Ku Klux Head," *La Crosse Tribune*, December 9, 1922, p. 1; Author's Phone Interview of April 20, 2007, with Clayborn Benson, Executive Director, Wisconsin Black Historical Society/Museum (Milwaukee); "Hidden Hatred, by Josh Holzbauer, <http://www.journalism.wisc.edu/j417/fall03/social/holzbauer.html>; <http://www.topix.net/city/amarillo-tx> --

16) Carr, p. 25; Historical Essay from *America's Black Holocaust Museum*; Author's Phone Interview with Bethany Criss, ABHM Program Coordinator, April 4, 2007.

17) Moore, Congresswoman Gwen, *Statement Regarding the Life of Dr. James Cameron*, June 13, 2006.

18) Cameron, p. 191; *The Historian*, Spring, "James Cameron, Wisconsin's Own Civil Rights Pioneer," by David J. Marcou, pp. 2-3.