

## **Cleveland's Original Black Leader: John O. Holly**

**By Mansfield Frazier**

In 1903, the year John O. Holly was born in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, we were a nation of 80.6 million people; a first class postage stamp cost two cents; Henry Ford organized the Ford Motor Company; the Wright Brothers made their historic first flight at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina; and Teddy Roosevelt was president.

In 1935, at age 32, Holly would become the driving force in establishing the Future Outlook League, which grew to become one of the most powerful organizations in Cleveland demanding — and achieving — better economic treatment for blacks. It was a long and rocky road he had to travel to win victories in the end, but the hallmark of his journey was his tenacious perseverance and determination. When something got in his way he found a way around, over, or through it. He had a tremendous sense of vision, and better yet, the ability to transmit what he could envision to others. If there is such a thing as a natural born leader, John O. Holly fit that description to a “T.”

But nothing came easy for Holly, especially early in his life. When his family moved to Rhoda, Virginia, at age 15 he quit school to work in the coal mines doing hard, dangerous and dirty work. It's doubtful that the memory of those dark and dank coalmines ever left him, and perhaps inspired him in later years.

World War I was just concluding in Europe and black soldiers, as they had in all of our nation's previous armed conflicts going back to the Revolutionary War, had served bravely ... only to be treated as second-class citizens upon their return to the United States. The lack of prejudice black American soldiers experienced in Europe would later set the stage for the call for better treatment at home, and Holly would become one of the men who would call the loudest and longest.

Holly's family would move soon again, this time to Roanoke, Virginia where he returned to school and graduated from Roanoke Harrison High School. After the family moved to Detroit, he began working in his father's trucking business while attending the Cass Technical Commercial School. Holly's father, in addition to running his own business, was involved in organizing autoworkers, which must have made a great impression on him as a young man and no doubt was instrumental in determining the path Holly's life would take in later years.

In 1926, Holly met and fell in love with Leola Lee. He married her and moved to Cleveland, the city in which she was raised. They had two sons, Arthur and Marvin. Holly initially found work in Cleveland as a porter at Halle Brothers Co., the most elegant department store in Cleveland. After being laid off from that job, he found employment as a clerk at the Federal Sanitation Company, a chemical manufacturing company, and then later as a chauffeur.

When Holly drove his employer to Chicago for the 1933 World's Fair, where, according to the definitive book on Holly and his era, *Alabama North*, written by Kimberly L. Phillips, “he witnessed blacks with jobs and managerial positions that had been won through boycotts against white-owned stores.” Phillips further writes, “Holly must have heard the excited buzz

that fourteen inexperienced black employees hired at the South Center Department Store had multiplied to become 60 percent of the 185 employees.”

Upon returning to Cleveland Holly excitedly recruited M. Milton Lewis, a college-educated black who could only find work selling insurance, and Harvey Johnson, who had a law degree from Western Reserve Law School, but was excluded from employment at white law firms. He held a meeting at his home to form the Future Outlook League (FOL) in 1935, with Holly serving as president, Lewis as vice-president, and Johnson as legal counsel.

From the very beginning, Holly’s insistence on direct, in-your-face action in the streets repelled the black middle class while drawing in the working class and those in need of employment. He was castigated as an “outsider” and a “foreigner” by the successful blacks that were more accustomed to negotiations and patience in their dealings with whites.

Despite his short stature, dark skin, and his pronounced southern accent (which many in the black middle class ridiculed, and former Cleveland Mayor Carl B. Stokes unfortunately referenced in somewhat uncharitable terms in his book *Promises of Power*) he was embraced by the black unemployed that found his presence and urgency appealing. But there was precedence.

A few years after arriving in New York City, Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican by birth, had launched the *United Negro Improvement Association* (UNIA). By mid-1919, the organization had grown to over two million members with the simple message that blacks should own their own businesses. The reason for the explosive membership of his organization was simple: The NAACP, which had been formed in 1909, was comprised of whites and lighter-skinned blacks. Rumors persisted that if a black wasn’t as light-skinned as a brown paper bag they couldn’t gain entrance into the organization. This left out the vast majority of blacks, who eagerly joined Garvey’s organization. When Holly’s organization, which was built from the grassroots up came along, the thousands of blacks that felt excluded by the elitist NAACP had found a home.

Nonetheless, there still was widespread disinterest in the FOL in Cleveland by the established black power structure until William O. Walker, who had recently purchased the *Call & Post*, endorsed Holly’s efforts. It would prove to be a powerful endorsement that worked both ways. Eventually white businesses began to advertise in Walker’s publication, which Holly adroitly used to lambast older and more cautious leaders as “moss back reactionaries.”

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The earliest "Don't Buy" boycott appeared in Chicago in the late twenties. Black men who had served in uniform for their country were embittered and emboldened. They reasoned that if they had been good enough to fight and die, why weren't they good enough to be hired, especially in their own neighborhoods? The first target was a small chain of grocery stores in Chicago's black ghetto that refused to employ persons of color. Referred to as "Spend Your Money Where You Can Work," this first campaign sparked a larger boycott against the Woolworth stores (which, at the time was one of the country's largest national chains).

The Woolworth's that refused to hire blacks was located in the middle of Chicago's "Black Belt." An aggressive black newspaper, the Chicago Whip, published fiery editorials endorsing the campaign. News of Chicago's successful boycott sparked similar campaigns across the country, particularly in New York between 1932 and 1941.

The black press, which largely had been — and to some degree still is — ignored by the white mainstream media throughout much of our nation's history would play a pivotal role in spreading the word about the boycotts and other battles confronting the black community nationwide. Newspapers like the Pittsburgh Courier, The Chicago Defender, the Baltimore Afro-American, the Amsterdam News and Cleveland's Call & Post constantly agitated on the issue of jobs for blacks in their own communities. Robert Lee Vann, the Courier's dynamic editor supposedly even brought the issue up at the White House in the spring of 1941.

As Call & Post publisher Walker occasionally recounted, about a dozen black newspaper publishers were summoned to the White House by President Franklin D. Roosevelt as America was about to enter World War II. Many of the papers had been publishing editorials questioning why blacks should join the military for service in yet another foreign war, after being treated so shabbily upon returning home from World War I.

President Roosevelt allegedly made both threats and promises at the meeting. He told the publishers that as long as the U.S. was not in a state of war, they could write and publish whatever they wanted. But he cautioned them that once a state of war existed, to editorialize against it constituted sedition, a crime for which he would have them arrested and imprisoned.

But Roosevelt knew they had a valid point and made them a promise. Don't argue against the war effort and he would integrate the military after the conclusion of the conflict. They agreed, and while Roosevelt wasn't alive to keep his word, his successor, President Harry Truman, did make good on the promise.

Walker said that before the meeting was over, Vann brought up the issue to the president about blacks not being able to get jobs in their own communities. Roosevelt said that while it wasn't a federal issue, he would see what he could do to help the situation. It was Walker's belief that Roosevelt was only interested in getting them out of the Oval Office as quickly as possible, and he never lifted a finger to help on the jobs issue.

With or without the president's help, the issue was gaining momentum around the country. Following Chicago's example, blacks in Brooklyn and Harlem instituted "Don't Buy" campaigns against various local white stores. Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., one of the most powerful black men in the U.S., was extremely aggressive on the issue and helped to place blacks in Harlem in hundreds of white-collar jobs.

This was during the height of the Depression and many folks, including whites, were out of work. Unionism was on the rise, and so was Communism. The FOL made strategic alliances with any groups that could help them advance their cause, and they did something the old-line black organizations had been reluctant to do: They put women in leadership roles, which was unprecedented.

Women like Marge Robinson and Isabelle Shaw were members of the “Investigation Committee,” which, again according to Phillips, “examined store practices and met with owners.” Most of the owners were reluctant to change their hiring practices. Holley resorted to picketing, which eventually yielded results.

According to Phillips, “Over the second half of the 1930s thousands of employed and unemployed African Americans, many of them migrants, were schooled in independent radical activism under the aegis of the league’s boycotts and meetings.” But jobs were not all that Holly was after. He wrote to a friend: “These men and women who are being placed in various stores will take the places of the white man and be the merchants of tomorrow with the experience acquired under the white man’s instruction.” He clearly wanted business ownership, similar to Garvey.

Saturday was the busiest shopping day of the week and when blacks showed up at the Woodland Market at 55<sup>th</sup> Street and Woodland with their signs that read “Fools Trade Where They Can’t Work” enough shoppers turned away to cause storeowners to begin rethinking their hiring policies. In some cases, blacks were hired within days, in others it would take weeks or more of picketing.

Other store owners, like white southerner Frank Barnes (who owned a store on East 73<sup>rd</sup> and Kinsman Avenue), remained recalcitrant and went to court to obtain an injunction that stopped the picketing. But Holly and his followers went door-to-door with leaflets and eventually drove Barnes Grocery Store out of business.

Holly and the other leaders of the FOL sometimes faced tear gas, and at other times were arrested. Yet they persevered and eventually persuaded storeowners to hire blacks in decent numbers. When blacks got hired they joined the FOL and became exceptionally loyal to the organization. The membership roles began to grow to the point where the established black leadership could no longer ignore Holly and the FOL. It was turning into a potent force, one to be reckoned with. And then Holly turned the attention of the organization towards downtown,

I clearly recall a 1947 protest at The May Co. a department store that was located in downtown Cleveland, which still refused to hire black sales clerks. Picket lines formed in front of the store — black folks carrying signs that read, “Don’t Shop Where You Can’t Work.” My mother was carrying one of the signs as I stood across Euclid Avenue with my father.

He was one of the dozen or so black men — bar owners, numbers runners, professional boxers — standing silently across the street from the protest (a few with pistols in their pockets) observing. Others also brought their children along to watch history unfold. I was four years old at the time.

The white police officers glowered at the knot of black men, and the black men glowered right back. I recall Holly and another man crossing the street to briefly huddle with the black men and then walking over and speaking with the police officers before going back to talk to the demonstrators. The term “shuttle diplomacy” had yet to be invented, but Holly had already mastered it. In short order, May Co. officials agreed to hire three black sales clerks. It wasn’t

long after pickets appeared that Ohio Bell followed suit and hired Artha Woods (who went on to serve on the Cleveland City Council, and later as clerk of that body) as its first black female telephone operator in Cleveland.

The next month, I was among the first group of black kids to ride the merry-go-round at the previously segregated Euclid Beach Park. In 1946, City Councilman Charles V. Carr had introduced an ordinance to make it illegal for amusement park operators to discriminate. And, by the summer of '47 (after some protests had turned violent) that battle was also won and the park was integrated.

Just as Birmingham, Ala., is known as the birthplace of the black civil rights movement, Cleveland can rightly claim to be the birthplace of the black economic and political rights movement in this country in large part due to the efforts of Holly, Carr and their associates.

When “downtown” success finally came, the FOL didn’t rest on its accomplishments. They forged ahead and expanded their efforts to include factories and other businesses where blacks had been historically underrepresented, and strengthened alliances with unions.

Holly was an acknowledged master at organizing. Active in the Democratic Party he took on Herman Finkle for the City Council seat in Ward 12 in 1937, which at the time encompassed much of the Central neighborhood. Although he lost, his zeal and skills caught the attention of Democrats statewide. He founded the statewide Federation of County Democrats of Ohio, Inc.

Carl Stokes, the first black mayor of a major American city, (in addition to the unkind remarks mentioned earlier), paid great homage to Holly in his autobiography. He wrote, “... when I was twenty-one, I had the privilege of learning about the realities of politics from John O. Holly.”

Stokes went on to say that Holly was among the most remarkable men he’d ever known, and that as a child growing up in the projects on 40<sup>th</sup> Street near Quincy Avenue, like so many others in the community, he came to revere the man as a hero.

“We didn’t call it black pride back then,” writes Stokes, “but if there was ever black consciousness and pride in Cleveland, it came through John O. Holly. He came along at a time when Negroes lacked any leadership from within. And to be black-complexioned even minimized your mobility within the ghetto.” But nothing stopped Holly.

Unlike many other so-called black leaders of that era — and to some extent even today — Holly took men like Carl Stokes under his wing and schooled them in the art of politics, thus preparing a new generation of leaders. Stokes readily admitted that without this tutelage he probably would never have become the nation’s first black mayor.

Holly died in December of 1974 at age 71 at Richmond General Hospital, leaving behind his second wife Marguerite; He was interred in Highland Park Cemetery. Cleveland’s main post office at 30<sup>th</sup> and Orange Avenue is named for John O. Holly, Cleveland’s original black leader.