

# White Collars and Blackface: Race and Leisure among Clerical and Sales Workers in Early Twentieth-Century Philadelphia

THE WORK OF CLERKS AND SALESPEOPLE formed the blood and sinew of the early twentieth-century industrial order, and uncovering their experiences is central to furthering our understanding of America in the age of smokestacks. These workers occupied an intermediate position in the social structure of the urban United States. Immediately above them on the class ladder stood middle-class proprietors and professionals; immediately below were skilled tradesmen and blue-collar workers. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, this middling workforce included office and sales clerks, bookkeepers, stenographers, telegraphers, and telephone operators, among others. They were information workers, well before the "Information Age" of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Clerks filed countless letters and memoranda. Stenographers and typists converted dictation into typewritten documents. Secretaries kept schedules. Salespeople controlled the exchange of information about products between businesses and customers. Without office and sales workers, the "visible hand" of management described by Alfred D. Chandler could not have functioned.<sup>1</sup>

Race, to a surprising degree, shaped the work and leisure lives of these almost exclusively white clerks and salespeople. They derived a distinct set of racial precepts regarding their status in society from their daily toil and

<sup>1</sup> Alfred D. Chandler, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977). Between 1870 and 1920, America's clerical workforce grew from about 80,000 to slightly over 3 million. See Ileen A. DeVault, *Sons and Daughters of Labor: Class and Clerical Work in Turn-of-the-Century Pittsburgh* (Ithaca, 1990), p. 12, table 1.

experiences at play. Aspects of their leisure lives, in fact, may be seen both as a confirmation and, to some extent, as an inversion of their working lives, the two realms echoing but also at odds with one another. Particularly interesting in this regard is the fascination that blackface performances held for these workers at this time, though minstrel shows had long been popular and interest in them was not confined to any one group. This essay examines how these performances, and race more generally, fit into the lives of the clerks and salespeople of one city, Philadelphia, during the first decades of the twentieth century.

The burgeoning commercialized leisure economy of the industrializing city enticed unmarried clerical and sales workers with its delights. Entertainment such as vaudeville performances, movies, and dance halls provided young clerks and salespeople with powerful messages about race, as well as about gender and sexuality. Many of Philadelphia's office and sales employees watched professional minstrels sketch out stereotypical portrayals of African Americans in local blackface theaters and vaudeville houses. Going a step further, personnel from Philadelphia's stores and offices imitated professional minstrels by forming their own minstrelsy clubs. In their clubs, clerks and salespeople, male and female, smeared themselves with burnt cork and acted racist parts to entertain each other.

Blackface minstrelsy, with its caricatures of African Americans, served as a perverse morality play for white clerical workers. Stereotypical blackface behaviors were the opposite of the loyalty, thrift, temperance, and love of hard work that employers expected of their office and sales employees. By laughing at minstrelsy, white clerks and salespeople affirmed their distance from these behaviors and their entitlement to the rewards offered by society in return for sober toil. Implicit in blackface routines was of course the assumption that African Americans were unfit for clerical work.

The content of minstrelsy appealed to office and sales personnel in a time of great professional change. Philadelphia's clerical workforce roughly doubled in size between 1900 and 1920. In 1900, women accounted for 23 percent of clerical employees; by 1920 they made up 41 percent of the workforce.<sup>2</sup> Both male and female clerical workers faced anxieties about upward occupational mobility and adequate remuneration in job settings

<sup>2</sup> The number of clerical workers in the city reached about 160,000 in 1920. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Occupations*, 672-78; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population*, 1193-97.



where mechanization and routinization were increasing. Both groups found that they could escape their cares under the glare of stage lights. Laughter at bigoted parody allowed individuals to forget their concerns about what we would now call gender politics in the workplace.

Also, though in Philadelphia almost entirely white—between 1900 and 1920 only about 1 percent of office and sales employees in the city were African Americans—this group of workers was relatively heterogeneous when it came to how long they or their parents had been established in America. Native-born whites who had American-born parents comprised just over half the clerical workforce. An additional third were the children of immigrants, while the rest were foreign born.<sup>3</sup> In the stilted depictions of blackface characters, second-generation immigrant office and sales employees could find common ground with their native white counterparts.

At its heart, blackface allowed a variety of clerical workers—men, women, ethnic-stock, and native—to minimize (at least temporarily) their differences, and develop a sense of shared racial identity. They found comfort in an understanding of whiteness as the guaranteed opposite of the caricatures they viewed on the minstrel stage.

Professional blackface minstrelsy had developed after the Civil War into a prominent feature of urban theaters and remained hugely popular throughout the rest of the nineteenth century. Professional minstrelsy became intertwined with the commercialized leisure economy of which, by the turn of the century, white-collar workers formed the core group of consumers.<sup>4</sup> White actors covered in burnt cork performed in vaudeville houses and during the first few decades of the twentieth century, the racist humor of blackface seeped into American movies and radio.

As Matthew Frye Jacobson has observed, "race resides not in nature but

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Occupations at the Twelfth Census* (Washington, D.C., 1904), 672–78, table 43; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Population 1920, Occupations*, vol. 4 (Washington, D.C., 1923), 1193–97, table 2.

<sup>4</sup> John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York, 1979), 36. Kasson describes vaudeville theaters, movie houses, and theme parks as major components in the new urban leisure economy. David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York, 1993), 2–9. While Nassaw's work and Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, 1986), do not focus exclusively on clerks and salespeople, their studies are the best general examinations of leisure that discuss clerical workers. An excellent source on nightlife is Lewis A. Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890–1930* (Westport, Conn., 1981).

in politics and culture."<sup>5</sup> Blackface was neither simply entertainment nor an element of American popular culture separate from the theater. Throughout the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, the minstrel stage served as an arena in which actors and audiences tinkered with the intertwining concepts of race, class, and gender. Scholars have linked blackface minstrelsy most often to white working-class male audiences, especially in the antebellum period.<sup>6</sup> These workers, too, used minstrelsy to forge a common sense of whiteness and to hide cleavages within their class.<sup>7</sup>

For blue- and white-collar workers alike, both revulsion and attraction lay at the heart of the blackface experience for whites. On one hand, performances loaded with stereotypes negated the humanity of African Americans and mocked their efforts to succeed in society. Clerks and salespeople in the audience and on stage clearly understood that they were nothing like the nasty caricatures they observed. Yet, on the other hand, whites were drawn both to laugh at performances and to strut on stage themselves. David R. Roediger and Lewis A. Erenberg have stressed that antebellum minstrelsy and popular post-Civil War "coon songs" allowed white audiences and minstrels to "project onto Blacks values and actions that aroused both fear and fascination among whites."<sup>8</sup> At the core of all of this existed the belief of many whites, both actors and spectators, that the caricatures represented authentic portrayals of African Americans and black culture.

Professional minstrel depictions of blacks grew more intensely vitriolic in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>9</sup> Slavery no longer provided a sharp distinction between whites and blacks. While antebellum minstrelsy typically drew its demeaning plots and tunes from a crude image of plantation life, blackface in the post-Civil War period often ridiculed the

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), 9.

<sup>6</sup> On minstrelsy, see especially Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1974); David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London, 1991); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York, 1993); Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley, 1996); William J. Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* (Urbana, Ill., 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 116, 127.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 116–17. The quotation drawn from Roediger's excellent study refers to Erenberg, *Steppin' Out*, 73.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.



aspirations and lives of urban African Americans. As a large number of blacks from the South migrated to the urban North in the early twentieth century, racist sentiment fed by the intellectual currents of social Darwinism increased among northern whites. The image of the swaggering urban dandy eclipsed the plantation slave on stage as turn-of-the-century minstrels spent quite a bit of their stage time disparaging the upward striving of blacks.<sup>10</sup> The dandified role included several hostile stereotypes of blacks as buffoons, intemperate laggards, and razor-wielding punks. The bigoted content of late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century popular coon songs (as well as the racist caricatures found on many of the song sheets printed for public consumption) tapped into the same animosity that fed the scientific racism of social Darwinism and eugenics. James H. Dormon argues that between 1890 and 1910, the popularity of coon songs "underlay a major shift in white perceptions of blacks; a shift whereby existing stereotypes came to be either confirmed or embellished and indelibly encoded as part of the semiotic system of the period."<sup>11</sup> Clerical workers' interest in minstrelsy was part of this transformation.

Philadelphia's office and sales employees readily absorbed blackface acts in local vaudeville houses. Even more directly, the city's clerical workers had ample opportunity to learn the medium first hand at a prominent local minstrel theater, the Eleventh Street Opera House. In the early twentieth century, Frank Dumont, a nationally renowned minstrel and avid promoter of amateur blackface, served as the Opera House's director. Dumont's celebrity, his efforts to gear the Opera House's productions toward white-collar audiences, and his active support of amateur minstrelsy helped legitimize blackface as a white leisure activity and as a form of expression for the city's clerks and salespeople.

From 1854 to 1911, the Eleventh Street Opera House was home to what locals considered the longest continuously running blackface minstrel theater in America. In a period when vaudeville dominated urban theatrical entertainment, the Opera House survived because of its widespread popularity and status as a Philadelphia institution. The Opera House had opened in 1854 in a renovated Presbyterian church, and the structure changed little during its long life. Minstrels applied their makeup in the former Sunday

<sup>10</sup> Frank Dumont, *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia* (Chicago, 1899), 1.

<sup>11</sup> James H. Dormon, "Shaping the Popular Image of Post-Reconstruction American Blacks: The 'Coon Song' Phenomenon of the Gilded Age," *American Quarterly* 40 (Dec. 1988), 450.

school room, and parts of the ecclesiastical interior predated the structure's conversion into a theater. Patrons easily discerned where the church's gallery had been transformed into a balcony, for example. Through the years, the house officially went by the names of the leaders of its minstrel troupes, but most Philadelphians referred to it as the Eleventh Street Opera. Located on Eleventh Street between Chestnut and Market Streets, the house lay conveniently close to clerical workplaces, including numerous office buildings, the Reading Railroad Terminal, and the city's major department stores: Wanamaker's, Gimbels, Litt Brothers, and Strawbridge and Clothier. At the turn of the twentieth century, Frank Dumont served as the last impresario of the house. The Eleventh Street Opera closed in 1911, but professional minstrelsy persisted in the city. Dumont renovated the old Ninth and Arch Street Museum structure and moved his troupe several blocks to the northeast. He renamed the museum "Dumont's" and it thrived until he died in 1919. Another minstrel, Emmet Welsh, took over and ran the theater until 1928.<sup>12</sup>

The Opera House and Dumont's catered to middle-class standards of audience decorum and behavior and the many clerks and salespeople working nearby attended the shows. Employees at Strawbridge and Clothier, for example, were clearly well aware of the Opera House's existence. In 1910, the children who worked at the store as cash boys and girls were treated to a show there. (Prior to the widespread use of the cash register, cash boys and girls functioned as the intermediaries between customers and a centralized cashiers' desk.) When a planned annual outing for the store's young workers was rained out, the committee arranging it hurriedly improvised an alternative that included a luncheon in the store's restaurant and a trip to the Opera House. The committee secured a large block of seats at the house where the boys and girls caught a blackface matinee. After the show, minstrels in drag posed for a photograph that later appeared in an employee magazine above the sarcastic caption: "Seven of the prettiest saleswomen of Strawbridge & Clothier."<sup>13</sup>

Strawbridge and Clothier would hardly have sent the boys and girls to the Opera House unless both clerks and managers found blackface acceptable.

<sup>12</sup> Note in Free Library of Philadelphia Theater Collection (hereafter, FLPTC), file: "Dumont's Arch Street at Ninth," (n.p., n.d.).

<sup>13</sup> "Sixth Annual Outing," *Strawbridge & Clothier Store Chat* 4 (Sept. 15, 1910), 255-57; all issues of this publication cited in this article are in acc. 2117, ser. 7, box 60, Hagley Museum and Library (hereafter, HML).



Philadelphians regarded the Opera House as appropriate for even the most impressionable of audiences. In 1899, Dumont intoned that his theater, "noted for the character of its entertainments, is patronized by clergymen, and is a household word among local and visiting pleasure-seekers."<sup>14</sup> Vaudeville theater owners routinely used statements like that to draw crowds they considered respectable, especially white-collar men and women. Dumont's promotion of his house as a venue offering legitimate entertainment encouraged Philadelphia's clerks to see blackface as a reputable form of fun. A journalist writing after the Opera House had closed described a visit to it as a Philadelphia tradition, appealing enough even for children as well as those "whose religious convictions kept them away from other show houses." The author lamented:

What Philadelphian is there who does not remember his first trip to Dumont's? Parents seemed to think that it was the place to take a boy or girl for their first glimpse inside a showhouse. And indeed, it was, for nowhere was such clean, wholesome humor, perhaps of the slapstick variety, purveyed. Fully half of Philadelphia's population saw its first show there.<sup>15</sup>

The Opera House was not the rough, masculine, working-class venue that antebellum minstrel theaters were.

But that did not mean blackface was simply child's play. Typical shows at the house began with a "circle" of blackface characters exchanging jokes and singing minstrel songs. Then the company performed two or three routines that included short plays written expressly for the minstrel stage as well as burlesques of current events, proper theater productions, or local news items. City politics provided ample material for the minstrels. Nearby

<sup>14</sup> Dumont, *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide*, 7; Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill, 1991), 180–85. Minstrelsy also often made its way into the astounding hodgepodge of acts that traipsed across the stages in Philadelphia's vaudeville theaters. A typical bill had twelve acts. A 1910 show included lectures, movies, dancing, a strong man, trapeze artists, ethnic comedy, and blackface minstrelsy. Harry Harris, "Keith's Days of Glory End . . . But Memories Linger On," newspaper unknown, June 6, 1949; Charles Bell, "Cartoons of Feature Acts Which Appeared at B. F. Keith's Theater, Philadelphia," untitled promotional booklet, 1912; see also flyer for week of Sept. 21, 1914, B. F. Keith's Theater; all in "Keith's 11th & Chestnut" file, FLPTC.

<sup>15</sup> "Minstrels' Home Is Closed Forever," *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, April 20, 1909, Mounted Clippings Collection, box 32: "Dumont's Theater," Temple University Urban Archives. The Eleventh Street Opera House closed in 1911. Perhaps the closing described in the above article was temporary or the article is misdated.

locations like the Broad Street Station and Wanamaker's in-store restaurant served as settings for comic sketches performed in the theater.<sup>16</sup> Thoroughly familiar with both of these places, clerical workers must have found the sketches set in them especially comical.

By the turn of the century, Dumont had achieved fame as the author of dozens of nationally circulated minstrel songs and skits that amateur troupes could perform. His theater showcased the material he wrote.<sup>17</sup> Dumont's work reflected the transition from antebellum to industrial-era minstrelsy. Much of what he penned abandoned the plantation setting in favor of more modern backdrops frequented by the city's clerks and salespeople. One of his skits referenced sales work in the urban arena. In fact, in the introductory notes to the sketch, Dumont reminds prospective minstrels that they should set the play within the context of their hometown—the play “has been localized in various cities by putting on the programme the name of some leading clothing house [such as] ‘Scenes at Rogers, Peet, & Co’ in New York; Oak Hall in Boston; and Wanamaker’s in Philadelphia; etc.” Dumont certainly utilized a version of the sketch to draw white-collar workers into the Opera House. Published in 1889, *Scenes in Front of a Clothing Store* revolved around “Monroe Dickinson” and “Job Hoosick,” two “seedy” criminal characters unwittingly hired by a clothing store owner to serve as living mannequins. As the duo models the store's latest suits, they rob customers passing by. The short piece underscored the notion that African Americans did not belong in the white-collar world, a message that undoubtedly struck a chord with status-conscious white clerks.<sup>18</sup>

By the turn of the century, Frank Dumont had written two widely distributed volumes on amateur minstrelsy, handbooks that Philadelphia's

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. Satires of Gilbert and Sullivan operas like *H.M.S. Pinafore* were extremely popular in the 1870s and 1880s. At the turn of the twentieth century, send-ups of local political infighting and scandals pleased crowds. In a 1903 article for *McClure's Magazine*, muckraker Lincoln Steffens described the city as “Corrupt and Contented.” Philadelphia's Republican-dominated municipal government was “the worst-governed city in the country.” The city provided mountains of material. Lincoln Steffens, “Philadelphia: Corrupt and Contented,” *McClure's Magazine* 21 (July 1903), 249.

<sup>17</sup> Dumont's short theatrical pieces were initially performed by professional minstrels and later published for widespread amateur consumption. Among the many one-act plays Dumont penned were: *An Awful Plot* (Chicago, 1880); *The Black Brigands* (New York, 1884); *Jack Sheppard and Joe Blueskin; or Amateur Road Agents* (Chicago, 1897); *How to Get a Divorce* (Chicago, 1897); and *Society Acting* (Chicago, 1898).

<sup>18</sup> Frank Dumont, *Scenes in Front of a Clothing Store* (New York, 1889).



white-collar minstrels had surely seen.<sup>19</sup> His work made him one of the most famous proselytizers of amateur blackface minstrelsy in the country. Published in 1899, *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide* built on an earlier volume and offered a comprehensive discussion of minstrelsy for novices. In it, he encouraged the development of amateur minstrel companies throughout the United States and offered basic instruction that included a glossary of stage terms, sample programs, skits, stories, gags, and monologues. The book pitched amateur minstrelsy as an appropriate "vehicle to present the talent of a club, college, school, or association," and even devoted sections to women minstrels, a rarity in professional blackface. Dumont's how-to manuals on minstrelsy reflected how mainstream blackface had become at the turn of the century not only something the city's clerks could imbibe as spectators but also something they could create on their own.

Analysis of existing sources on how clerks used amateur blackface minstrelsy offers a glimpse into the ways that race influenced the lives of Philadelphia's clerical workforce in the early twentieth century. Many of the city's office and sales workers got their initial training in business colleges like the city's Peirce School.<sup>20</sup> The college, established in 1865, thoroughly prepared students for work in the office or on the selling floor. Pierce graduates, who created an alumni association in 1893, also developed the *Peirce School Alumni Journal*, first printed in 1895. Its pages contain an amazing array of material related to the lives of clerical workers. In 1906, the Strawbridge and Clothier department store, a Philadelphia institution, began an employee-produced magazine, the *Strawbridge & Clothier Store Chat*. Like the Peirce publication, *Store Chat* is a goldmine of information on the work and leisure lives of clerical and sales employees in turn-of-the-century Philadelphia.

A tale full of racist humor that ran in an 1911 edition of the *Strawbridge & Clothier Store Chat* repeats several popular minstrel themes and hints at the turn-of-the-century shift in white attitudes toward African Americans

<sup>19</sup> Dumont, *Wehman's Burnt Cork; Or the Amateur Minstrel* (New York, 1881); Dumont, *Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide*. A copy of the Witmark guide is in the collections of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

<sup>20</sup> In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the school went by a variety of names including Peirce's Union Business College, the Peirce College of Business, the Peirce School of Business and Shorthand, and the Peirce School of Business Administration. For clarity, it will be referred to hereafter as the "Peirce School."

discussed by James H. Dormon. In this racist parable, a black wife calls a doctor about her sick husband. According to the wife, the husband has fallen ill for no apparent reason after he spent what is billed as a "typical day" in the park. The typical day for this stock character involves overeating, heavy drinking, tumbling off two amusement park rides, and getting into a razor fight. The wife cannot understand what is wrong with her husband and urges the doctor to visit. An introduction to the story propounds that it "is really one of the most characteristic tales of the colored race ever printed. It is more than that; however, it actually points a moral of importance to all of us."<sup>21</sup>

Salespeople were encouraged to derive a common identity as whites in opposition to the tale's stereotypical depiction of African Americans as violent, clumsy, and ignorant would-be dandies. The stereotypes are offered as reality to the white clerks perusing the story. The tale depicts dissipation as "characteristic" of African Americans. The husband cannot stop eating, drinking, fighting, or causing scenes in general. He wastes precious time and money on excessive leisure. He is unruly, aggressive, and loud. The husband's shenanigans disrupt household life, render him unemployable, and call into question his role as provider within the household by impugning his dedication to family and employer. To top it all off, his wife is too ignorant to grasp the situation.

Another racist narrative, from a 1904 edition of the *Peirce School Alumni Journal*, served additional purposes. The plot concerns a white man who hires an African American valet. The white man purchases a pair of "loud, checked trousers" that his valet covets. The valet contrives to spill grease on the pants and thus inherit a pair of unlaunderable hand-me-downs. The black character's boss implores him to wash the pants. As a matter of course, the servant never even attempts a washing. His employer asks him:

"Did you scrub them well?"

"Yes, sah."

"Did you try a hot iron and a piece of brown paper?"

"Yes, sah."

"Did you try ammonia?"

<sup>21</sup> "A 'Telephony,'" *Strawbridge & Clothier Store Chat* 5 (Oct. 15, 1911), 248, HML.



"No, sah. I ain't done tied 'em on me yet, but I knows they'll fit me."<sup>22</sup>

White clerks could laugh at the accent of the black dandy, his confusion about the word "ammonia," and his disloyalty. The interchange reminded Peirce alumni that blacks did not belong in their work world. The white-collar workers could also laugh at the boss who exhibited bad taste in clothing and was easily hoodwinked by his employee. The medium of racial humor allowed them to poke fun safely at the managerial class.

The two stereotype-laden tales conjure a loathsome vision of blackness. But this vision did not stand alone. The traits of laziness, duplicity, drunkenness, and buffoonery developed in the stories were the polar opposites of ideals laid out for clerks and salespeople within the context of work. *Store Chat* and *Alumni Journal* readers were bombarded with articles, poems, and first-hand accounts declaring that model clerical employees loved hard work, embodied thriftiness and loyalty to the firm, and led temperate lives.<sup>23</sup> Authors reminded readers to seek jobs that taxed their talents to the utmost. Employers purportedly sought workers who were trustworthy and "proof to temptation." Commentators announced that today's frugality paid off in old age or periods of misfortune, and overindulgence in drink and sensuality unquestionably led to disgrace and failure.<sup>24</sup> If this were not enough, the publications also featured observations about these ideals by renowned national figures such as Marcus A. Hannah and Andrew Carnegie as well as prominent Philadelphians like financier Edward T. Stotesbury, traction magnate Peter A. B. Widener, and Russell H. Conwell, founder of Temple University.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> "By Aid of Scissors," *Peirce School Alumni Journal* 9 (March 1904), 6; all issues of this publication cited in this article are in acc.1, ser. 6, box 2, Peirce College Archives (hereafter, PCA).

<sup>23</sup> These traits reflected the themes of popular success manuals published between 1870 and 1910. See especially Judy Hilkey, *Character is Capital: Success Manuals and Manhood in Gilded Age America* (Chapel Hill, 1997), 22. The manuals were most often read by small-town or rural Americans, however. Olivier Zunz found that loyalty to the firm was an important theme emphasized by DuPont management to its salesmen in the early twentieth century. See Zunz, *Making America Corporate, 1870-1920* (Chicago, 1990), 187-89. Clark Davis, *Company Men: White-Collar Life and Corporate Cultures in Los Angeles, 1892-1941* (Baltimore, 2000), 42-49, 95-100, also highlights the theme of loyalty in the corporate workplace.

<sup>24</sup> "Work, Work, Work," 7 (Sept. 1901), 12; "Easy Positions," 8 (March 1903), 7; "Following Ideals," 11 (Dec. 1905), 3-4; all *Peirce School Alumni Journal*, PCA; "Ideals," *Strawbridge & Clothier Store Chat* 1 (Oct. 1906), 5, HML.

<sup>25</sup> A good example is Russell H. Conwell, "'Be Not Slothful in Business'—Romans 12," *Strawbridge & Clothier Store Chat* 3 (Sept. 15, 1909), 217-18, HML. Conwell was also the minister of Grace Baptist Church in North Philadelphia and a well-traveled speaker who preached to anyone who would

The clerical ideals emerged in an overwhelmingly white work context, and minstrelsy helped link them with whiteness itself. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, very little opportunity existed in Philadelphia or anywhere else in urban America for African Americans seeking office or sales jobs. Privately-owned white firms in the city seldom hired African Americans as clerical workers. White employers in the clerical realm worried that their white customers and clients would refuse to be served by African Americans.<sup>26</sup> In 1912, only one black, a receiving clerk in a small department store, appeared on the payrolls of six hundred white businesses in the city.<sup>27</sup> The situation was not much better in black-owned businesses, which typically were tiny and failed quickly. African Americans did find employment in department stores and offices in menial positions as elevator operators, porters, messengers, janitors, and waiters (in-store restaurants). Tantalizing nuggets of information suggest that the city's white clerical workers paid little attention to the few black menial employees around them. For instance, saleswomen at Strawbridge and Clothier used the public elevators as a social space where they could engage one another in friendly interaction while on the job—something frowned upon by their bosses. When the elevator doors shut, the workers loudly gossiped, discussed their vacations, snickered and used slang, all of which infuriated the customers who complained to store management. Saleswomen relaxed in the elevators, beyond the gaze of their supervisors. But their sense of freedom also suggests that the black elevator operators who silently observed them were either

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listen about the value of hard work and generating wealth.

<sup>26</sup> For other cities see, Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890–1920* (Chicago, 1967), 29, 30–34, 152–55; Kenneth L. Kusmer, *A Ghetto Takes Shape: Black Cleveland, 1870–1930* (Urbana, Ill., 1976), 78–80; Joe William Trotter Jr., *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat* (Urbana, Ill., 1985), 81–82. Both Kusmer and Susan Porter Benson note that white businesses in the clerical realm refused to employ African Americans because they feared losing white customers. Angel Kwolek-Folland has found that during the 1920s greater opportunity existed for African Americans in white-collar work. See Kusmer, *Ghetto Takes Shape*, 80; Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890–1940* (Urbana, Ill., 1986), 209; and Kwolek-Folland, *Engendering Business: Men and Women in the Corporate Office, 1870–1930* (Baltimore, 1994), 8.

<sup>27</sup> R. R. Wright Jr., "A Study of the Industrial Conditions of the Negro Population in Pennsylvania and Especially the Cities of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh," in *Annual Report of the Secretary of Internal Affairs, Part III, 1912*, vol. 40, ed. Bureau of Industrial Statistics (Harrisburg, Pa., 1914), 21–195. Wright's study indicated that little had changed since 1896 when W. E. B. DuBois's monumental examination of African American life in the city was published. See W. E. B. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, centennial ed., ed. Elijah Anderson (Philadelphia, 1996).



invisible or of no consequence to them.<sup>28</sup> When they noticed blacks at all, whites saw them in rather unflattering terms. In 1909, a white employee at Strawbridge and Clothier claimed that the burden of responsibilities he faced on the job and at home was the chief distinction between himself and African Americans working in the store. Black workers, he thought, could be happy-go-lucky because their allegedly simple lives provided them with no real worries. The white employee believed that black workers in the store abided by the mantra "don't worry, smile."<sup>29</sup>

Just as work informed white-collar attitudes about race, so did the leisure activities that clerks created on their own. Their amateur blackface minstrel shows were freighted with complex, intertwining messages about class, gender, and race. Whether engaged in amateur minstrelsy or watching professional acts, clerical workers laughed and shuddered both in the same breath, all the while reinforcing a common racial and occupational identity. On stage they tinkered with traits foreign to the ideal office or sales worker. It was all right to be deceitful, slothful, profligate, savage, and a simpleton under a layer of burnt cork in the imaginary realm of play. Acting like that in the everyday white world of the sales floor or office was out of the question.

Blackface performance had been the province of males before the late nineteenth century, with male actors cross-dressing to play female roles. In 1906, women at Strawbridge and Clothier formed the distinctive all-female Clover Mandolin Club. Dozens of women lingered in the store after work on Fridays to learn how to play the mandolin, and members developed close bonds. They "graduated" once they became competent at strumming the mandolin. At graduation ceremonies, each woman collected a personalized humorous graduation favor; in 1907, Rhoda Salmon earned a knife to "sharpen her flats."<sup>30</sup>

The Clover Club held annual concerts, and for their performance in the spring of 1910, the club presented a "Minstrel Show and Dance" held at Dawson's Grotto. Twenty-four women in blackface and fine white dresses played their mandolins and performed sketches, accompanied by a band.

<sup>28</sup> "Some Elevator Don't's [sic]," 3 (Aug. 15, 1909), 209; "Elevator Entrances and Exits," 3 (Nov. 15, 1909), 294; "A Thoughtless Action," 4 (Dec. 15, 1909), 12; "Elevator Courtesy," 4 (Jan. 15, 1910), 27; all *Strawbridge & Clothier Store Chat*, HML.

<sup>29</sup> "Unlooked for Examples," *Strawbridge & Clothier Store Chat* 3 (Oct. 15, 1909), 112, HML.

<sup>30</sup> "Mandolin Club," *Strawbridge & Clothier Store Chat* 1 (Sept. 1907), 7, HML.

The Mandoliners organized their performance like professionals. A typical professional minstrel show focused on three stage personalities: an interlocutor, and "Bones" and "Tambo," whose stage names sprang from the bone castanets and tambourine they played. The interlocutor was the master of ceremonies. For this role, the Mandoliners employed a man in blackface and a white suit. "Bones" and "Tambo" served as the central comedic figures, utilizing crude racist comedy to rouse the audience. Two department store women played these characters for the Mandoliners, with heavy makeup featuring exaggerated white lips. In addition to the three central figures, soloists and choruses exhibited their vocal and instrumental prowess.<sup>31</sup>

The 1910 concert was not a one-time event for the club. In 1912, its members once again staged a minstrel show, this time at Mercantile Hall in Philadelphia. On this occasion, thirty-eight "young ladies took part in blackface." The Mandoliners' show combined anti-suffrage sentiments with their racist repertoire in a number called "Woman's Suffrage Parade."<sup>32</sup> This skit followed themes suggested in a "stump speech" parody included in Frank Dumont's 1881 guide for amateur minstrels. The speech, titled "Female Suffrage," was meant for a cross-dressing male thespian but was readily adapted for women. In it, the blackface character, dolled up to look like a "woman's rights champion," assails men: "My dear, dear sisters! We are here this evening to discuss, recuss, and cuss the men generally." The monologue descends from there into a sweeping assault on men.<sup>33</sup> Professional male minstrels had a long tradition of using blackface to criticize women who dared to break with Victorian gender mores.<sup>34</sup> Applying burnt cork and cross-dressing allowed male minstrels to satirize women willing to challenge men in the political realm, a traditionally masculine arena. The Mandoliners, clearly, were willing to direct blackface humor at those same targets.

The Mandoliners' performances likely reassured the men in the audience (and those reading reviews of the shows in *Store Chat*) that the women of the department store were not as threatening as suffragists. This soothing display catered to white-collar men, insecure about their workplace status

<sup>31</sup> "Mandolin Club's Minstrel Show," *Strawbridge & Clothier Store Chat* 4 (May 15, 1910), 138, HML.

<sup>32</sup> "The Mandolin Club," 6 (May 15, 1912), 137; "The Mandolin Club and Orchestra Entertainment," 6 (June 15, 1912), 153; both *Strawbridge & Clothier Store Chat*, HML.

<sup>33</sup> Frank Dumont, *Wehman's Burnt Cork*, 43-44.

<sup>34</sup> Toll, *Blacking Up*, 162-63, 183-84; Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 125.



and upward mobility as women increasingly entered department store and office employment. The Mandoliners not-so-subtly implored their male department store colleagues to believe that saleswomen were on their side, not antimasculine as suffragists. While they might work together on the selling floor, the men need not see women as competitors. Instead, men and women could find common ground in lambasting other women perceived as overly aggressive.

The general context of each show was equally reassuring. The performances constructed a burnt-cork version of store life that emphasized male authority figures. The male interlocutor filled the role of masculine management, controlling the pace of performance and occupying center stage. A handful of men (not wearing burnt cork) conspicuously occupied the seats of the accompanying band in front of the minstrel stage. With the numerous women Mandoliners, they conspired to titillate the audience with a bigoted production. In this blackface imitation of the gender dynamics on the selling floor, men and women toiled together harmoniously and pleased their "customers" with skits and songs. Symbolically duplicating the gender relations of the selling floor, men filled pivotal roles in the store and on stage while women largely comprised the ranks of the chorus.

While the Mandoliners purveyed antifeminist and bigoted stage material, they chose not to lampoon expectations about appropriate female dress. The women minstrels wore demure white dresses, not the mismatched gaudy clothing of "wenches" portrayed by traditional male, cross-dressing performers. The Mandoliners' masquerade involved a complicated layering of gender, class, and racial issues. Their message included the incongruity of seeing blackened skin juxtaposed against the clothing of young white female clerks. This must have struck the crowd in the packed houses they played to as farcical. *Store Chat* described the show in the spring of 1910 as "most pleasant."<sup>35</sup>

Provided they performed in conventional attire, the Mandoliners seemed all too ready to denigrate things like black culture and suffrage activists that mainstream American society deemed strange. Susan Porter Benson has shown that saleswomen prided themselves on having a sense of fashion or stylishness. It was an important element in the on-the-job identity of women

<sup>35</sup> "Mandolin Club's Minstrel Show," *Strawbridge & Clothier Store Chat* 4 (May 15, 1910), 138, HML.

who worked in department stores.<sup>36</sup> The Mandoliners' white dresses reminded audiences that the women possessed the good taste of department store clerks. Social mores did not allow white women in blackface to act or dress lasciviously like the cross-dressed "wenches" of the male minstrel show. Even though the Mandoliners painted their skin black, audiences knew that whiteness lay underneath, emphasized perhaps by the delicate white fabric of their dresses. The content of their minstrel performances proved more intricate, therefore, than the broad parodies of antebellum, all-male troupes. By "blackening up" and yet simultaneously dressing in middle-class attire, the Mandoliners mocked the upward striving of African Americans. The alternating layers of whiteness and blackness they depicted on stage informed both audiences and performers that they all shared a common racial and occupational identity. Their minstrelsy insinuated that African Americans could never be part of their exclusive, white, occupational world, a powerful message to all involved in the show. As David R. Roediger has noted, "The simple physical disguise—and elaborate cultural disguise—of blackening up served to emphasize that those on stage were really white and that whiteness really mattered."<sup>37</sup>

Fourteen young men working at Strawbridge and Clothier also engaged in minstrelsy through the Argyle Minstrel Club, formed in 1912. The club first met in a gymnasium on the store's athletic fields in West Philadelphia. Three older male employees lent their instruction to the teenaged minstrelsin-training, as only four of the teens had had stage experience. The group performed at a Philadelphia Knights of Columbus hall in April of 1912. The production required several busy weeks of rehearsals to familiarize the newcomers with acting.

The club prided itself on its original material, especially its jokes. The show included twelve songs, skits with physical comedy, jokes, and sketches. The evening finished with a sketch entitled "Wanted, a Valet." In the sketch, the two "applicants" were "Lewis Lewis" and "George Washington Congo."<sup>38</sup> The first's name was clearly demeaning. The latter, an insidious juxtaposition, substituted "Congo" for the surname of scientist George Washington Carver. For whites in the audience, the Congo symbolized the most primitive and savage setting possible, and the name captured white

<sup>36</sup> Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 235–36.

<sup>37</sup> Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 117.

<sup>38</sup> "The Argyle Minstrels," *Strawbridge & Clothier Store Chat* 6 (May 15, 1912), 134–35, HML.



scorn for African American aspiration and achievement.

The minstrels drew for the audience clear lines between white and black, civilization and barbarity, along with clear concepts of class. Blackface characters applied for menial jobs as servants. For these young white men, African American hopes of advancing into the white-collar realm were laughable. The blackface production may well have fortified the actors against doubts they might have had about the future of their careers in the clerical world. Worsening opportunity for career advancement represented a central concern among men in the office and on the selling floor. Ileen DeVault has noted that at the turn of the century, the "increasingly pyramidal organizational structure of offices" slowed rates of upward mobility for men in the clerical world.<sup>39</sup> The bottom ranks of the white-collar workforce expanded much more rapidly than the managerial class. The young male minstrels may have clung to the notion that at least their jobs existed beyond the reach of black Philadelphians, alleviating their anxiety about their own shrinking chances by granting them some measure of social exclusivity.

Additional amateur blackface troupes arose among white-collar workers in Philadelphia. Strawbridge and Clothier's lower-level management participated in blackface minstrelsy. Floormen formed the Heed Club's minstrel group in 1910, and in June of that year they gave an elaborate, highly choreographed stage performance backed by a small orchestra.<sup>40</sup> Students at the Peirce School developed their own blackface minstrel troupe in 1911, performing as the "Ham and Egg Club" for fellow students, alumni, teachers, and guests at a rented hall in Philadelphia. The presentation by the all-male group was a huge hit. A dance followed. In a poignant minstrel twist, the student performers used their blackface alter egos to subvert white authority and throw "good-natured 'knocks'" at faculty members attending the show.<sup>41</sup>

The Ham and Egg Club arose in an institution that prepared thousands of young men and women to become clerical workers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Peirce trained people for all types of office and sales work. The fact that faculty and alumni came to and enjoyed the club's performance indicates that the school's administration approved of the show's content. Minstrelsy was viewed as something appropriate for clerical workers and to their formative development while in school. The club's racist

<sup>39</sup> DeVault, *Sons and Daughters of Labor*, 19.

<sup>40</sup> "Heed Club's Minstrels," *Strawbridge & Clothier Store Chat* 7 (June 15, 1910), 182, HML.

<sup>41</sup> "The Ham and Egg Club," *Peirce School Alumni Journal* 16 (June 1911), 6-7, PCA.

extravaganza was popular in part because it helped solidify a school-based identity among students and reinforced camaraderie among faculty and graduates.

The performance particularly assisted students in the development of a mutual identity fixed in a sense of shared whiteness. Like the city's clerical workforce, Peirce had a sizable population of second-generation immigrants. Between 1880 and 1910, 28 percent of the school's students had two immigrant parents, while another 14 percent had mixed backgrounds—one foreign-born parent, the other born in the United States. Only half of the student body had native-born parents. Seven percent of Peirce's students were immigrants themselves.<sup>42</sup> As Matthew Frye Jacobson has shown, in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth, neither the Irish nor the new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe were considered as white as the descendants of western Europeans. Jacobson writes that these years "witnessed a fracturing of whiteness into a hierarchy of plural and scientifically determined white races."<sup>43</sup> Anglo-Saxons ruled this hierarchy and immigrants such as Italians and Russian Jews held an inferior racial status in American society and culture. The "whiteness" of these newcomers was questioned by a wide range of Americans including academics, politicians, scientists, and social commentators. By using African Americans as caustic comedic material, second-generation immigrants at Peirce and within the general clerical workforce could shore up their status as whites.<sup>44</sup> By laughing at the stereotypes on stage, ethnic individuals publicly affirmed their desire to assimilate or "pass" as bona fide whites. The irony of putting on a black mask as an affirmation of whiteness did not seem to cross the minds of amateur minstrels.

Minstrels did not fear that the stereotypes they displayed in their performances would stick to them once they ventured offstage. This is reflected in one of the most intriguing passages in Frank Dumont's 1899 *Amateur Minstrel Guide*. It dealt with the processing and application of burnt cork and reiterated the cosmetic, temporary nature of blackface minstrelsy. Dumont began by outlining how the stage makeup was prepared.

<sup>42</sup> The figures come from a sampling of the 1880, 1900, and 1910 enrollments which included 441 students.

<sup>43</sup> Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 7. See also 1–14, 39–90.

<sup>44</sup> Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*, discusses the connection between blackface minstrelsy and ethnicity.



Minstrels collected champagne corks or scrap from cork stopper factories, placed this material in a tin pail and set the contents ablaze. They then ground the ashes left at the bottom of the can and mixed them with water, forming a paste. Minstrels preserved the tincture in small tin boxes. Dumont counseled amateurs to ritualize the application of the cork. He highlighted the ease with which the transformations between whiteness and ersatz blackness occurred. Performers moistened the cork if it had dried out, daubed it onto their left palms and then rubbed their hands together. Next, it was gently applied to the face. Some minstrels left wide margins around their mouths to exaggerate their lips. Actors wiped their palms off, because Dumont advised that this more accurately depicted a black man's hand and kept the cork off costumes. Eyebrows were dusted with chalk for emphasis. Wig application was the final step. At this point, amateur minstrels were ready to parade racial caricatures on stage. Dumont stressed the ease with which actors made the transition from blackface back to ordinary life once a show concluded. The removal of the burnt cork visage required only soapy water and a sponge. With a simple rinse the performer once again became a "Caucasian ready to take up the 'white man's burden' instead of the coon's."<sup>45</sup>

Many of Philadelphia's clerks and salespeople clearly understood this duality. They intimately connected whiteness with ideals about work handed to them in the context of a lily-white workplace. This entailed their "white man's burden." The affected blackness of the minstrel show was an inversion of these ideals and a temporary respite from their "burden." This duality is reflected in an item drawn from *Store Chat*. A 1914 article applauded Harry L. Sampson's talents as a minstrel. He worked as a salesman in the Men's Clothing Department. Outside the store, Sampson had fifteen years of blackface theater experience. The biographical sketch proclaimed that, "some of Sampson's best friends would hardly recognize him in minstrel garb."<sup>46</sup> Like the Mandoliners or members of the Argyle Club, he led a double life. In his predominantly white work world, Sampson absorbed and lived the life of hard work, thrift, and loyalty promoted by management. In his spare time, on stage, he flouted these traits, sheltered by the understanding that his inversion of workplace ideals was only mimicry of African Americans.

<sup>45</sup> Dumont, *The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide*, 14-16.

<sup>46</sup> "Harry L. Sampson," *Strawbridge & Clothier Store Chat* 8 (Nov. 15, 1914), 76, HML.

The appeal that minstrelsy had to Philadelphia's clerks can be largely understood as stemming from changes in the nature of their occupational world. In the early twentieth century, the office and sales workforce expanded tremendously and included increasing numbers of women. Simultaneously, the chances for workplace promotions shrank. Second-generation, immigrant, white-collar employees wrestled with assimilation into mainstream society. In this context, dehumanizing African Americans lent security. It reinforced the white ideals that clerical minstrels learned at work. Slathering burnt cork onto their faces allowed these clerks to role-play and safely indulge in behavior that they considered inappropriate for their workaday lives. For them, minstrelsy was a humorous recreational outlet or release from the tedium of the store or office. The key factor for these amateur minstrels was that the stereotypes embodied in their performances did not adhere to them. They were temporary manifestations of the stage to be laughed at and washed away with the burnt cork at the end of a show.

*Bradley University*

JEROME P. BJELOPERA