(should such time ever come) that such unwarranted conclusions can be documented.

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There are those in government who would have us believe that all is well in America, that horrifying tales of increased poverty, a rise in the number of homeless and hungry, the frightening incidences of black unemployment, especially among the young, are just a figment of liberals' imaginations. Such attitudes are the product of callousness, insensitivity, and a curious American proclivity to ignore its history. Edmunds's small book snaps us back to reality and reminds us of a time not too far distant when black Americans were imprisoned in poverty and denied all the benefits of citizenship by a universal racism. It is a reminder that we are not too far removed from the days just after World War II when blacks could not swim in city pools, when there were no black secretaries on the staffs of city corporations, when one searched in vain for a black face in the local media, in nursing and medical schools, or behind the counters of department stores. It took "wade ins" and much violence before the pools were desegregated, demonstrations led by the present speaker of the state house of representatives K. Leroy Irvis, before department stores agreed to employ blacks behind their counters, and the twenty years of badgering and hectoring by the Urban League and other black organizations before the Board of Education hired its first black teacher in 1937. That is not an enviable record, and in a period of recession when social programs are being decimated the appearance of Edmunds's book is almost a call to arms, a plea for vigilance, lest we revert to darker days.

But the book is also a tribute to all those who fought against frightful odds in an effort to improve the condition of blacks in the city. In that sense it is a statement of hope. Formed in 1918 as a social welfare agency, the Pittsburgh Urban League tackled the many problems created by the massive influx of southern black migrants in the years after 1915 when Pittsburgh's black population grew at an annual rate of nearly 45 percent. In the next two years it rose 227 percent.
Ninety-five percent of those who arrived were coming to unskilled jobs working ten to twelve hours a day for wages rarely in excess of thirty cents per hour. Housing conditions were appalling and as a result of poor sanitation mortality rates skyrocketed. The league, an outgrowth of the Association for the Improvement of Social Conditions in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, which had been formed in 1914, and the Pittsburgh Council for Social Services Among Negroes, which had been formed in 1915, was organized specifically to address the pressing needs of the migrant. Among other services the league provided traveler’s aid, worked to improve employment opportunities, obtained improvement in housing, health and sanitation and recreation facilities, and did battle against discrimination in unions. But more than just a social welfare agency, the league brought together groups of concerned whites, black ministers, and professionals in an effort to pressure the city to address the needs of the migrants. The league quickly grew beyond its initial agency role to become an advocate for improved race relations that necessarily involved the removal of racial restrictions. It aimed, Edmunds writes of its later activities, to prevent the “recurrence of problems by developing self-sufficiency — and self-sufficiency for black people means removing the artificial barrier of racial discrimination which bars them from equal access to good jobs, decent housing, educational opportunities, and quality health and welfare services” (p. 159).

The emphases and strategies of the league have changed over the decades but never its insistence on keeping channels of communications open to all sectors of the city, believing that objectives achieved through patient negotiation, even if it takes twenty years as it did in the case of the Board of Education, are more likely to survive the vicissitudes of changing conditions. Such an approach has not always been well received by those impatient with intransigence or the glacial speed with which the city has generally responded to black demands for equality. But the league’s enviable list of accomplishments and the fact that it has survived and continues to be a vibrant advocate and defender of black interests cannot be gainsaid. Edmunds may be right; pursuing equal opportunity for black Americans is akin to “swimming through a vat of molasses . . .” (p. 100).

This is a fine book and should be read by all those interested in the history of the black experience in Pittsburgh. It is not, however, a history, for it lacks the element of critical analysis of events and individuals that we associate with historical writing. That is not meant as a criticism, for no future history of the black experience in Pitts-
burgh can afford to ignore it. It is, however, a tribute, a mission that rescues from obscurity, if not oblivion, the many men and women who labored long and mightily in the face of terrible odds — those who swam through the vat of molasses — to promote and defend the interests of blacks. The book contains some wonderful vignettes, rich in detail, that only a sympathetic insider could know and appreciate. We should all be grateful to Edmunds for keeping the memory of these people alive.

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