

The Early Civil Rights Movement in *A Raisin in the Sun*

By Anna Grady



Racial tensions in Chicago during WWII (image via CivilRightsVets.com and The History Reader)

In Lorraine Hansberry's play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, the family, the Youngers, face injustices that many working-class black families in 1950s Chicago did. Hansberry sheds light on the everyday struggles of African American people during this time period through mentions of race restrictions in neighborhoods and a theme of hope for equality.

In the play it is Lena/Mama's dream to move into a real home, one with its own bathroom and a yard with space for a garden. When she finally finds a home that they can afford, it is in an all-white neighborhood. What follows is the terrible reality of "race-restrictive covenants." They are offered a bribe in return for not

moving into the neighborhood but the Lena's son Walter doesn't take it, and at the end of the play they move in despite adversity.

In approximately 1940 to 1960, as a result of the industrial jobs available during and after World War II, the city of Chicago saw a large influx of African Americans moving there from the South. In response to this, as well as the rising number of veterans returning from war, the city was under a housing shortage. Black people were usually restricted to what was known as "The Black Belt" and white people started forming "restrictive covenants." This caused horrific overcrowding in the small area that Black people were allowed. The apartment which the Youngers live in during the play exemplifies the average conditions of the areas. White landlords would often break up singular apartments into multiple units and charge the same amount of rent. Multiple families would share one bathroom as shown in the play and oftentimes a kitchen as well. Fatal fires were rampant in the Black Belt and mortality rates were higher in this area than in greater Chicago. It wasn't until 1948 when the Supreme Court declared restrictive covenants unconstitutional. Even so, situations like bribery and threats to black families trying to move into predominantly white neighborhoods continued for many years as shown in the play. They were not fully outlawed until the federal Fair Housing Act of 1968. This act made it illegal to prohibit people from moving into certain areas on the basis of race, sex, religion, or nationality.

What may seem like a small yet substantial victory now gave hope to millions of people that the fight for equality was still moving forward.

Sources

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