

Soho Community House Race Relations[†]

In the early 1800s Soho was a vacation spot for many a wealthy Pittsburgher. "Soho Gardens" was famous for its fruit trees, its roses, jasmine, and honeysuckle.

"The seclusion of the place," read a newspaper account, "the impossibility of intrusion from roughs and rowdies, none of whom are admitted on any account, and the fact that liquor of any kind is prohibited on the grounds, render it ideal for a summer resort."

But Soho lost its wealthy residents. They fled the industrial development which brought dirt, noise and shanties. In their stead came laborers from many lands and Negro workers from the south.

By 1930, census figures listed 5,013 people in Soho (census tracts 4-A and 4-B), of whom half, 2,027, were gainfully employed. And of these, 486, or nearly a quarter, were women.

The men took to the steel mills and to the building industries; the women entered domestic service, and hotel, restaurant, and boarding house jobs. Both men and women went into the wholesale and retail businesses.

For organized recreation this working group turned naturally to fraternal lodges and churches. Their children, on the other hand, have found organized recreation in the Soho Community House.

Of a registered membership of 629 in the settlement in May, 1938, only five were 35 years of age or older, and the largest number of members was in the age group 10-19 years. In addition, many persons of all ages who have not formally registered as members of the Community House use the settlement facilities.

A reason for this emphasis on youth is the difficulty of planning for and with groups of older people, most of whom are first generation Americans, speaking a great variety of languages. According to the 1930 census, 53 per cent of the heads of families in the community (exclusive of Negroes) were foreign born.

[†] Harry Serotkin. "Race Relations at the Soho Community House," *Federator*, July Issue, Vol. XIII, No. 7, 1938.

A study made in May, 1938, revealed that Soho Community House members came from families representing 19 different nationality groups. Only a quarter (29 per cent) of the members came from homes in which both parents were American.

Incidentally, comparatively little evidence of intermarriage between nationalities was given. Three-quarters of the members came from homes in which both parents were reported to be of the same nationality.

Although such a large proportion of the members came from homes with foreign background, the members themselves represent a local group as to birthplace and present residence. The majority, 460, were born in Pittsburgh, while 43 others were born elsewhere in Pennsylvania. Only 31 persons were born in other states; 25 of these were Negroes, born in southern states. Nine persons, all white, were born in foreign countries.

As for present residence, two-thirds of the registered members came from census tract 4-B in which the Soho Community House stands, and from census tract 4-A across the street.

The majority of the members attended some school, of which the principal schools were Soho, St. Agnes, and Fifth Avenue High, respectively. White persons attended a larger number of different schools than the Negroes did.

Only 105 persons (17 per cent) were not attending any school. Of these 105, 28 were working, 28 were housewives, and 49 were unemployed. A larger proportion of Negroes than of white persons were in the group who were out of school and unemployed.

Because a large proportion of the community is Irish and Slavic, one would expect a large proportion to be Roman Catholic. This expectation is borne out by the fact that 250 members came from families in which both parents were Roman Catholic; 103 persons came from Protestant families, of whom the largest number, 54, were Baptist; 56 persons came from Greek Catholic families; 11 came from Jewish families.

As in the case of nationality, so with regard to religion, the majority of persons (65 per cent) came from families in which both parents were of the same religion.

Since, however, one-third of the persons did not report the religion of one or both parents, any conclusions as to the religion of members and their parents must be regarded as tentative rather than final.

Negroes, who form 20 per cent of the population of Soho (1,000 out of 5,013), also form 20 per cent of the registered membership of the Soho Community House. Brought in from the south as cheap labor or as strikebreakers, they encountered the rancor of the white neighbors with whom they competed for jobs.

These Negroes now live in the worst houses; unemployment in proportion to their number is much greater than for white people; poverty and prejudice, lack of education and of opportunity handicap them.

These are formidable obstacles. Against them a settlement house can act by adding its voice to the clamor for better housing. It can seek, as well, the provision of more adequate recreational facilities and vocational opportunities.

But its greatest contribution can be to open its doors to Negroes along with their white neighbors, to welcome them, give them friendship and an opportunity to develop the best that is in them; most important of all to allow Negro and white to learn that they have much to give each other and many problems to solve in common. This contribution the Soho Community House seeks to make.

The Board of Directors and the staff follow a policy of equal welcome and equal opportunity to white and Negro neighbors alike. Staff members must be free from race prejudice. Negroes are part of the staff, receive the same supervision, and have the same opportunities for planning as do the other members of the staff.

At present the staff includes the following Negroes: one full-time W.P.A. worker, three N.Y.A. workers, one college student in training, and six volunteers. In addition, a prominent Negro dramatics director has been engaged for a part-time program next fall.

The settlement program consists of self-governing clubs; classes in cooking, dancing, and beauty culture; physical education and swimming; dramatics, arts, and crafts; and sewing, woodwork, metalwork, puppets, and string work.

There is a branch of Carnegie Library in the building. Free dances with W.P.A. orchestras are held during the month. There is a game room with table games, ping pong, and pool tables. Two mothers' clubs, a class in English, and monthly parties serve to interest the parents. So also do such things as the library, gymnasium, playgrounds, summer camps, and thrift gardens.

TABLE I
Group Membership in February, 1938

————— Membership of Groups —————

Type of Group	Total	White	Negro	White & Negro
Total	170	107	24	39
Clubs	30	18	8	40
Classes	20	9	4	7
Teams	73	64	8	1
Special interest groups	21	11	1	9
Athletic activities	21	4	2	15
Social recreation	5	1	1	8

Unless Negro and white members prefer otherwise, activities and organizations are open to both groups. For example, the Social Council, which plans social activities for young people, has representatives from white and Negro clubs.

Dances, however, by mutual wish, are separate. Some gym classes are mixed, others are limited to one group or the other, depending on the age, wishes, and temperament of the particular classes.

Every member is welcome to write for and work on the House newspaper. In actual practice, white and Negro members mix more when they are children; boys mix more than girls; interest groups and classes, and large groups without definite enrollment mix more than social clubs and athletic teams. (See Table 1.)

To guide the staff in providing the fullest service and most intelligent approach to its Negro neighbors, an Advisory Committee of local and prominent Negroes was organized two years ago under the leadership of Mr. William Howell, former staff member at the Soho Community House and now an active supporter of increased opportunities for Pittsburgh's Negroes.

The purpose of this committee is three-fold: to secure volunteer leaders for Negro groups and classes; to consider ways of creating a better interracial attitude in the House, an attitude which must then be reflected in the whole community; and finally, to consider ways of saying to the Negroes of the community, "This settlement house and its facilities are for your use and enjoyment."

Progress towards better race relations is furthered and is hindered by white and Negro members alike. The whole community of Soho agrees that a community house should properly provide for every neighbor, white and Negro. And this is the objective which the Soho Community House is trying to achieve.