

“DON’T LET THE LEGEND DIE”

by A. James Fuller



Ray Crowe '38

It was a Hoosier basketball tradition. The team that won the high school state championship proceeded triumphantly through the streets of Indianapolis to celebrate their victory. The team and their fans and city residents crowded into cars and drove noisily along, making their way to Monument Circle at the heart of downtown. Ironically, no school from the capital city itself had ever managed to win the state championship. Surely, if an Indianapolis school ever won, the celebration would be all the more exhilarating.

But it wasn't. In 1955, the city at last had its champion. And, to a degree, the community embraced the winning team, but the procession took a different route than the traditional one. The champions were from Crispus Attucks, an African American high school, and racial tensions seethed beneath the polite surface of congratulations and acceptance. When Oscar Rob-

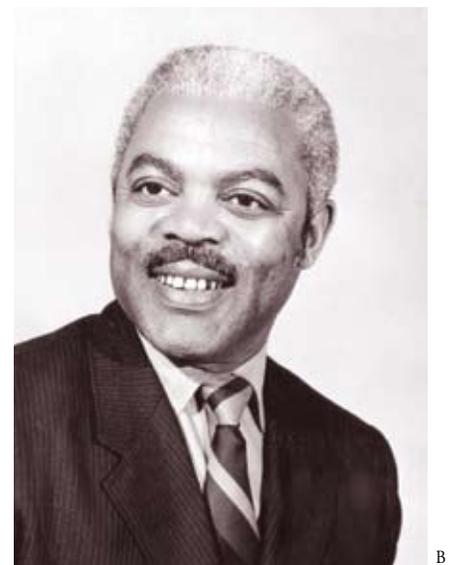
ertson, a team leader on his way to fame as a college and professional basketball star, realized that the procession was going through the black section of town and not going downtown, he went home to tell his father, "They don't want us." Indianapolis newspapers bragged about "our team" and celebrated the victory, but many citizens, black and white, were uncomfortable. No one understood the situation better than Indiana Central alumnus Ray Crowe, the head coach of the Crispus Attucks basketball team.

Born and raised on a farm near Franklin, Indiana, Ray was one of ten children. At Whiteland High School in Johnson County, he was the only black player on the team. Recruited by basketball coach Harry Good, he came to Indiana Central College in 1935. James L. Brunner, an Indiana Central alumnus and author of a book about the school, asked Ray about his experience as a college student in the late 1930s. He said that, "I couldn't have been treated better by Coach Good and the college community." In fact, years later, many of his closest friends were men he had met in college. When Brunner asked if there had been any trouble with racism, Ray remembered that a Hanover player "roughed me up in a game and called me a name." His teammates rushed to help him and the Hanover president called the school to apologize. On another occasion, the team was "refused service in a southern Indiana restaurant, because of me. Coach Good put the team back in our cars and we drove to Columbus, where the entire team was served."¹

After graduation, Ray began his career as an educator, teaching math and coaching basketball at School 17 in Indianapolis. His success as an eighth-grade basketball coach led to his appointment as head coach at Crispus Attucks. The school was the result of increased pressure for segregation during the 1920s and had opened its doors as the city's only black high school in 1927. Despite a 1949 state law that outlawed school segregation, separation remained the reality in Indianapolis for years afterward.

African American leaders in Indianapolis had undertaken a somewhat unique approach to the struggle for civil rights. Unlike other cities, where racial confrontation and mass protest became the norm, the black community in Indianapolis focused on political exchange and negotiation to achieve victories in their fight for equality. This meant cooperation and coalition with whites rather than open resistance and agitation. Working with whites within the power structure created an environment that often allowed white leaders to ignore racial problems, and the policy of exchange pursued by African Americans was certainly not a matter of negotiation between equals. But the methods of what historian Richard B. Pierce called "polite protest" brought considerable progress, especially at times when the city was concerned about its image.²

This era of polite protest was well under way when Ray Crowe moved to take the job as coach at Crispus Attucks in 1950. He brought in the players he had coached in eighth grade and made them the core of a high school team that adopted the aggressive style of play that soon became the hallmark of Ray's teams. His strategy brought quick results. In 1951, Ray's first season, the Attucks Tigers lost only one game in the regular season and advanced to the state championship tournament. Since the state had not yet divided high school athletics into divisions according to size, the basketball tournament included every winning team, a fact made famous by tiny Milan High School's victory in 1954. While the "Milan Miracle" story became the stuff of legend and served as the basis for the movie *Hoosiers*, the road taken by Crispus Attucks has been largely ignored. But it was as dramatic and almost certainly more historically significant.



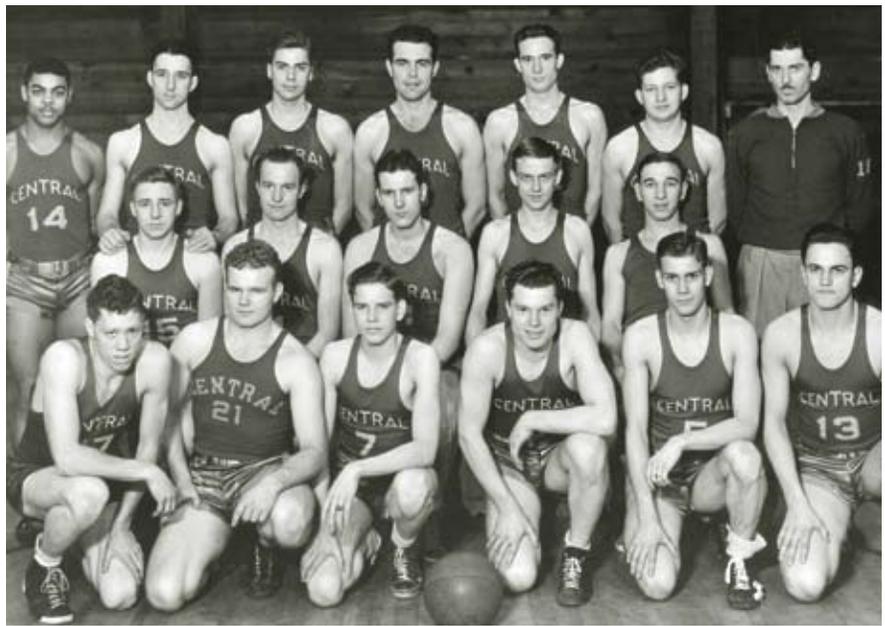
The 1951 Attucks team was largely ignored by Indianapolis. Although the capital city had not yet produced a champion, the community at large was reluctant to embrace the African American school. Corky Lamm, the widely read sports reporter for the *Indianapolis Star*, didn't expect Attucks to go beyond the first round. But the Tigers went to the Fieldhouse at Butler University and won the sectional tournament. They advanced to the regional tournament with many of the white citizens of Indianapolis not quite sure what to think about them. Some whites feared that if Attucks won the state championship, blacks would riot. To his credit, Corky Lamm dismissed these fears as irrational, but reassured his white readers that Attucks did not have a prayer of winning it all.³

But African Americans embraced their team with joy. The sectional victory brought a huge celebration in the streets as thousands flocked to Indiana Avenue in the heart of one of the city's major African American neighborhoods. While the *Star* reflected the white majority's ambivalent feelings toward the team, the *Indianapolis Recorder*, the city's

leading black newspaper, led the movement to make high school basketball another arena for the struggle for civil rights. Indeed, many black leaders saw the team's success as an opportunity to advance race relations by bringing the city's policy of segregation to the forefront. The players were urged to behave themselves and were repeatedly reminded that they represented not only their school, but also the whole African American community. With this heavy weight on their young shoulders, they entered the regional tournament.⁴

Standing beside his players, Ray Crowe worried about the pressure and the situation as a whole. He joined some other African American leaders who feared that an Attucks championship might actually hurt race relations, as they thought whites were not yet ready to have an all-black team represent the city. Nevertheless, there were games to play and the Tigers continued to win. The most dramatic moment of the 1951 tournament came in the game against Anderson. The crowd at the Butler Fieldhouse cheered along racial lines as the white team from Madison County came from behind to take a ten-point lead with four minutes to go. Throughout the game, Attucks suffered from bad calls by the officials, clearly a sign of racial prejudice as the white referees intervened on behalf of the Anderson players. The Tigers closed the gap and won the game, 81-80, on a last-second shot by Bailey "Flap" Robertson. Corky Lamm called it "the most dramatic and exciting game" in the history of the tournament.⁵

The regional victory brought an even larger celebration in the African American community. Attucks went on to win the semi-state tournament and reached the final four. During the days leading up to the finals, Ray Crowe talked continually to his team about sportsmanship; a decision that, according to Richard B. Pierce, Ray Crowe came to believe may have been a mistake. There had been no trouble with discipline and the players had acted like gentlemen under extremely stressful situations in hostile environments. But the coach felt the weight of carrying the whole community and wanted to fulfill the plans of those leaders who wanted to make a statement about civil rights. If the Attucks players won and acted



politely, they would be living symbols of the fact that African Americans should be given rights because they deserved them. Throughout his career as coach, Ray Crowe would continue to emphasize the importance of good sportsmanship and behaving as black ambassadors, but in this one situation, he worried that this may have hurt the team because it reined them in and interfered with their customary aggressive style. Attucks lost the semi-final game against Evansville Reitz. In later years, Ray lamented his preparation for the game: "We were not ready, and that was my fault. I made up my mind right then that we would be back, and the next time we would be ready." When the team returned to Indianapolis, many praised them for their efforts and talked about how honorably they had acted. But one African American boldly stated, "Sportsmanship cost you the game."⁶

Four years later, Ray Crowe's team returned to the final four. This time, they won the state championship. Flap Robertson's younger brother, Oscar, led the Tigers to victory. In 1955, whites openly embraced the Attucks team and cheered the city's first champion. But the championship was not hailed as a victory for civil rights. Between the two final four appearances, the city of Indianapolis had come to terms with the Tigers' success. Ray's team dominated the city. They lost in the sectionals in 1952 and a

controversial foul call cost them the game in the semi-state round in 1953. In 1954, they lost to tiny Milan in the semi-state tournament. But their superiority on the court gave the capital city's white citizens the chance to adjust their thinking. According to historian Richard Pierce, by 1955, sports no longer carried the weight of race. Whites had learned to compartmentalize their views. They could momentarily make heroes of black high school athletes, then expect those same individuals to take low-paying jobs. They could cheer for an African American sports team while still supporting segregation.⁷

So it was that the victory procession took a different route through the city and Oscar Robertson left the celebration in dismay. The 1955 championship was ambivalent for African Americans. On the one hand, there was hope in the fact that whites accepted the team and their separate celebration validated their own sense of worth and identity. On the other hand, being marginalized in the midst of their state championship was another reminder of the limits of equality. That same ambivalence reigned when Attucks won the state championship again the following year. Oscar Robertson was voted Indiana's Mr. Basketball for his high-scoring leadership. But in spite of his consecutive championships, Ray Crowe was not named Coach of the Year.

Progress came slowly but surely. In 1957, Bob Jewell, one of the stars of the 1951 Attucks team, became the first black scientist at Eli Lilly Company. That same year, Ray Crowe retired as basketball coach to become the athletic director at Crispus Attucks. He immediately hired Bill Garret, Indiana University's first black basketball player, as the high school's head coach. In 1959, Attucks won its third state championship and in 1960, Oscar Robertson led the American team to an Olympic Gold Medal in Rome. He went on to fame in the NBA, including a championship with the Milwaukee Bucks in 1971. Robertson was inducted into the NBA Hall of Fame in 1980.

Ray Crowe's success extended beyond basketball. In 1966, he ran for office and won election to the state legislature. He would serve two terms. Later, he served as chair of the House Education Committee, a position that allowed him to help push for school integration in Indianapolis. Having experienced integration in his own high school and college days, Ray was convinced that ending educational segregation was essential for achieving equality. In 1969, court orders began the process of integration and teachers began to be reassigned. Several Attucks teachers went to work in previously all-white high schools. In 1971, the first white students arrived at Attucks and by the middle of the decade, desegregation was well underway. The construction of the Indiana University, Purdue University, Indianapolis (IUPUI) campus eliminated much of the residential area around Crispus Attucks and this led to a 1986 call for turning the high school into a middle school. The Indianapolis Public School district plan caused an outcry in the black community and hundreds of citizens packed the auditorium to protest the decision. Ironically, perhaps, desegregation helped destroy a symbol of social and cultural identity in the African American community. Marvin Johnson, a former world boxing champion who had attended the school, pleaded with the school board: "Crispus Attucks has become a legend. Don't let the legend die." Despite such emotional appeals, the school became a middle school in 1993.



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Ray Crowe did not let the legend die. Instead, he lived it out. He continued his career in public service when he accepted an appointment as director of the Indianapolis Department of Parks and Recreation. Later he won election to the City-County Council. One famous event in his later years was his cameo appearance in the movie *Hoosiers* that mythologized the "Milan Miracle." Some, including Oscar Robertson, criticized Ray for taking part in the film, arguing that doing so ignored the story of Crispus Attucks while celebrating a white victory. But Ray knew basketball's importance in Indiana and realized that appearing in the movie would assure that Crispus Attucks was included in some small way. He believed that progress comes in small steps, even though an aggressive style might sometimes make things move a little faster. His appearance in the film was just another way of making sure the legend does not die.

Within Ray Crowe's lifetime, a new generation of African-American leaders would develop new strategies and tactics for continuing the struggle for civil rights that would be better suited to the challenges of a more integrated society than the tactics of "polite protest" that Crowe pursued in such effective ways. Today, we remember Ray

Crowe and other advocates for civil rights for the ways they used the opportunities available to them within the limits of the segregated world into which they were born.

Throughout his long career, Ray Crowe remembered his time at Indiana Central and could point to it as an example of how personal relationships and community could overcome prejudice. Late in life, in an interview with James L. Brunner, Ray reminisced about his college days and fondly remembered old friends, professors, and events. He said that, "the best days of my life were college days at ICC." Ray Crowe died in December 2003 at the age of 88. His memorial service, held at Crispus Attucks, drew a large, racially-mixed crowd, including many of his former players. To celebrate his life, the memorial included a procession that drove along the traditional route taken by Indiana State Basketball Champions. As the cars made their way around Monument Circle, Ray Crowe again became a symbol of the issue of race in Indiana. Unlike in 1955, however, this time whites and blacks traveled the road together.

- Distinguished Alumnus Award 1970
- Member of the Board of Trustees 1969–1981

INDEX OF PHOTOGRAPHS: IDENTIFICATIONS & PERMISSIONS

Ray Crowe '38

- A (p. 54) Ray Crowe as member of track team at Indiana Central College from *The Oracle* (1938). Photograph from the Alumni Files used with permission of the Frederick D. Hill Archives, University of Indianapolis.
- B (p. 55) Ray Crowe later in life (date unknown). Photograph from alumni files used with permission of the Frederick D. Hill Archives of the University of Indianapolis.
- C (p. 56) Ray Crowe with the ICC basketball team in *The Oracle* (1938); photograph used with permission of the Frederick D. Hill Archives of the University of Indianapolis.
- D (p. 57) Ray Crowe at his desk (date unknown). Photograph from the Alumni Files used with permission of the Frederick D. Hill Archives of the University of Indianapolis.

NOTES

Ray Crowe by A. James Fuller

- ¹ James L. Brunner, *Distinction Without Pretension: The Little School That Did* (Nineveh, Indiana: First Books Library, 2003), 322.
- ² Richard B. Pierce, *Polite Protest: The Political Economy of Race in Indianapolis, 1920-1970* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).
- ³ For a complete examination of the history of the Attucks team, see: *Ibid.*, 9-25.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 125-126