

LILLIAN THOMAS FOX

by Victoria B. Tashjian

THOUGH BYRD PARKER DID NOT SURVIVE TO SEE HIS DAUGHTER into adulthood, he likely would have been proud of her. Parker's accomplished daughter, Lillian Thomas Fox, born in Chicago around 1854 and raised in Oshkosh, continued her father's campaign of social and political activism.¹ As a young adult, limited by the narrow range of jobs open to African American women in the North, she worked as a hairdresser in Oshkosh.² Things changed after she moved to Indianapolis in the 1880s, where by the early 1890s she had begun working as a reporter and correspondence editor for the *Indianapolis Freeman*, a black newspaper with a national audience. In 1900, she was hired as a columnist by the *Indianapolis News*, becoming the first African American to hold that role on a white Indiana newspaper.³

Like her father, Lillian Thomas Fox sought to improve the lives of African Americans. Her columns highlighted the accomplishments of African Americans in Indianapolis and elsewhere. She was deeply involved with Colored Women's Improvement Clubs on the Indianapolis, state and national levels, generally in leadership roles. She helped to organize the Indianapolis Anti-Lynching League and worked to grant African Americans in Indiana access

to tuberculosis treatment denied them at facilities that treated whites. A highly regarded public speaker, she gave talks across the United States.⁴

Lillian Thomas Fox did see the achievements of emancipation and suffrage for African American men, causes her father had devoted his life to achieving. Yet she also witnessed the backlash against black progress that followed. This took the form of white supremacy enshrined in Jim Crow laws in the South, and heightened racism and exclusion in the North, including in northeast Wisconsin and Indiana. Thomas Fox must have known of the violent racial cleansings of longstanding black communities that occurred in Decatur and Evansville, Indiana, in 1902 and 1903, as well as in many other states in the early decades of the twentieth century.⁵

Though she spent her life in the Midwest, Thomas Fox had at least one first-hand encounter with Jim Crow. Like her father, she participated in national conventions, and in 1896 traveled by train from Indiana to the "colored congress" at an Atlanta exposition. Six miles south of Chattanooga, Tennessee, "Mrs. Fox was informed by the conductor that she would not be permitted to ride in the ladies' coach, and must go to the 'jim crow' car."⁶ She refused and was removed from the train. The conductor allowed Thomas Fox to return because northern passengers protested her ejection, but she preferred the discomfort of riding outside on the train platform on a cold winter night to the injustice of the Jim Crow car.⁷ Three years later, at a debate whose resolution read, "race prejudice is decreasing in the United States," Thomas Fox answered strongly in the negative.⁸

Notes

1. Lillian Thomas Fox is listed as six years old in the 1870 census, though other sources give different birth years and differ over some other details of her life. See the 1870 US Census: Fond du Lac, Fond du Lac County, WI. Born a Parker, Lillian Thomas Fox later took the surname of her mother Jane's second husband, Robert Thomas, a prominent Oshkosh barber, who Jane Parker married in 1863. Lillian married James E. Fox in 1893 and, already established professionally as Lillian Thomas, used the name Lillian Thomas Fox for the rest of her life. See "Marriage of Robert B. Thomas to Jane J. Parker," *Winnebago Marriages*, Vol. 1, p. 57, University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh Archives and Area Research Center (AARC); "Death of a Former Oshkosh Man," *Oshkosh Daily Northwestern*, April 13, 1880; Julie Slaymaker, "Lillian Thomas Fox," *Indiana Journalism Hall of Fame*, 2014, <http://mediaschool.indiana.edu/ijhf/fox-lillian-thomas>.
2. 1870 US Census: Fond du Lac, Fond du Lac County, WI. Her mother Jane, the widow of two professional men of some financial means, worked as a washerwoman in Wisconsin following her second husband's death. See the 1880 US Census: Augusta, Eau Claire County, WI.
3. Slaymaker.
4. See Slaymaker; Frances A. Toler, "Lillian Thomas Fox: Black Woman Journalist of Indiana," M.A. Thesis, Ball State University, 1978; and "Mass Meeting of Colored Women," *Indianapolis News*, February 5, 1904. In 1884, Thomas Fox herself used the Winnebago County Court to regain her rightful ownership of her father's Lots 10 and 33, the family homestead, which the family had apparently lost some time after her father's death. See Estate of Byrd Parker, Winnebago County, County Court Probate Case Files, 1838-1870, Winnebago Series 4, Reel 8, University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh AARC.
5. James W. Loewen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 90-96. See also Elliot Jaspis, *Buried in the Bitter Waters: the Hidden History of Racial Cleansing in America* (New York: Basic Books, 2007).
6. "Indignity of 'Jim Crow' Cars: Colored People Consider the Case of Mrs. Lillian Fox," *Indianapolis Journal*, February 18, 1896.
7. Cold ultimately drove her there. See "Indignity of 'Jim Crow' Cars."
8. "Question of Prejudice," *Indianapolis Journal*, July 26, 1899. One hundred and twenty years after her assessment, data shows that on a number of key indices Wisconsin, where Thomas Fox grew up, has the worst racially based disparities of any state. See, for example, Dan Schneider, "The Worst Place in the U.S. to be Black is... Wisconsin," *Dollars&Sense*, November/December 2015, <http://dollarsandsense.org/archives/2015/1115schneider.html>; Madison365 Staff, "New Report Ranks Wisconsin #1 In U.S. For Racial Disparity," *Madison365*, August 23, 2017, <https://madison365.com/new-report-ranks-wisconsin-1-u-s-racial-inequality/>.

Lillian Thomas Fox, December 31, 1889, shortly before embarking on her career as a journalist. (Library of Congress)

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