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**SPEAKER 1:** The spirit of mob rule, the prevalence of Lynch law in all parts of our country is such that now, it is not only the particular Negro who has incurred the bitter displeasure of the white man, who becomes the object of the mob's fury, but any Negro who happens to be in the neighborhood becomes the victim of hearts that cry for vengeance.

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**LORNA BENSON:** The turn of the century was a troubling and violent time for African-Americans in this country. One generation after the end of slavery, Blacks faced widespread discrimination, barriers to voting, and the terror of Lynch mobs. In this month's Minnesota Century series, the story of Frederick McGhee, a little known figure whose life as a civil rights advocate set the stage for this century's most influential Black civil rights organization, the NAACP.

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Frederick McGhee was born a slave in Mississippi in 1861. Freed when the Civil War ended four years later, McGhee managed to get an education through local Presbyterian schools. In the mid-1880s, he followed his older brother to Chicago where he soon graduated from law school. In 1889, McGhee set off for Saint Paul where he hoped to make a name for himself as the state's first Black attorney.

Arriving in Saint Paul, McGhee was greeted by a growing metropolis, thick with trains and steamboats. Historian Paul Nelson is writing a biography of Frederick McGhee.

**PAUL NELSON:** It would have been a smoky, smelly, noisy town with a lot of unattached young men coming here to work, hundreds and hundreds of saloons, a lot of low level crime. So it would have been a perfect place for someone like McGhee who was a trial lawyer, who specialized in criminal defense.

**LORNA BENSON:** McGhee plunged right into Saint Paul's seedier side, making a career of defending two-bit hoods, prostitutes, pimps, and convicted rapists. In the fall of 1891, he tried a case that helped build his reputation as a great criminal defense lawyer. McGhee represented three whites accused of trying to sell a young Minneapolis girl into prostitution.

The sensationalistic press coverage endeared the public towards the blond, blue-eyed girl. But through a thorough cross-examination and a persuasive closing argument, McGhee was able to get his clients acquitted.

**PAUL NELSON:** So here was McGhee, a southerner who had learned his ways as a lawyer in Black Chicago, comes to Minnesota. And he has to deal with a completely white world of the courts. And such as was his confidence and were his skills that he was a very effective trial lawyer in criminal cases, primarily. He had a way of persuading these white Germans and Scandinavians to see things his way.

**LORNA BENSON:** Even though the state was still overwhelmingly white, a campaign by a Saint Paul Black newspaper to lure African-Americans to the state boosted the Black population. By 1900, 5,000 Blacks lived in the Twin Cities. Most worked as day laborers or domestics, but there were also barbers, a mortician, two doctors, and six other lawyers. John Wright is an associate professor of African-American Studies at the University of Minnesota.

**JOHN WRIGHT:** There was a very strong community of African-American professionals here in Minnesota who, like Frederick McGhee, had migrated to Minnesota from elsewhere in the country in part because this was still an almost frontier terrain and one in which some of the harsher laws that prohibited African-American free association and political participation and so on and so forth hadn't become formally established here.

**LORNA BENSON:** But life for Blacks in Minnesota wasn't free from discrimination and insult. In 1901, Saint Paul's Black newspaper reported an argument McGhee had when J.M. Dunn, another lawyer, called him the most derogatory of racial slurs.

**SPEAKER 2:** The attorneys were arguing over an assessment of costs in a case, and the discussion had become quite heated. Dunn was very angry at some point raised by McGhee and injected into his remarks something about doing business with a damn nigger. What's that? asked McGhee. Repeat that expression. And stepping forward, he spat twice, the excrement striking Dunn squarely in the face.

This act startled Dunn, and for the next few minutes, he was vigorously engaged in using a handkerchief. But he made no response, except to say that he didn't want any trouble. Dunn's refusal to resent the insult seemed to further enrage McGhee, and he proceeded to tell Dunn what he thought of him. You're a contemptible coward, you are, said McGhee. I claim to be a gentleman of honor. If a man spat in my face, he'd quit walking.

**LORNA BENSON:** McGhee spoke out for civil rights as much as he literally fought for them. He led local chapters of the Afro-American League, the Minnesota Civil Rights Committee, and the Afro-American Council. To the horror of McGhee and other leaders, violence was escalating across the country.

In 1901, the nation's leading anti-lynching spokeswoman, Ida B. Wells, reported an alarming statistic. In the previous two decades, over 2,000 Blacks had been lynched or 3 people a week. Professor John Wright.

**JOHN WRIGHT:** What happened after Reconstruction was that the whole edifice of American apartheid that we call Jim Crow, was erected between 1880 and 1910, essentially. And the struggles against, again, the disfranchisement, against the rise of segregated transportation and housing and all the other public facilities, again, of course, became central concerns in African-American life, North and South, and the course of African-American intellectual life.

And the course of the political conventions and organizations is heavily determined, again, by a battle over which kinds of strategies to pursue.

**LORNA BENSON:** Many intellectual leaders, including the nation's most influential Black leader Booker T. Washington, were willing to accept some of the discriminatory practices of southern whites in exchange for economic advancement. They were labeled by their critics, accommodationists. A growing part of the Black leadership saw flaws in this approach.

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The argument over how to best achieve civil rights was intensifying in 1902 when McGhee helped convince the National Afro-American Council to hold its annual meeting in Saint Paul. McGhee himself was an unusual voice in the movement, a Democrat at a time when almost all other Blacks were Republican.

But he strongly felt the 1902 conference needed a unified, nonpartisan agenda. And Booker T. Washington was the only man powerful enough to bring the council together. He pleaded with Washington to attend.

**FREDRICK MCGHEE:** I have to write to you of our very deep anxiety concerning your coming to the meeting of the National Afro-American Council in Saint Paul next July. Recognizing how very much you will aid us by coming, we want to say that in a much larger way, your presence will be helpful indeed to the race because men who would otherwise be actuated by personal and selfish interests will be deterred in pushing them. Our organization too, now more than ever, needs safe and sound guidance.

**LORNA BENSON:** But instead of providing safe guidance, Washington and his supporters took advantage of a lull in the convention to push through a vote that essentially transformed the National Afro-American Council from a nonpartisan organization into one sympathetic to the Republican Party. Historian Paul Nelson.

**PAUL NELSON:** One of the things McGhee hates about the Booker T. Washington takeover of the NAAC is that in effect, the organization becomes an arm of the National Republican Party. And this offends McGhee for two reasons. One, he's a Democrat, and he hates the Republican Party. Second, the NAAC, from its founding, is explicitly a politically-independent organization.

And McGhee sees, as others saw also, that if Blacks, as a political force, can simply be assumed to be the property of the Republican Party, they will be taken for granted.

**LORNA BENSON:** At the close of the 1902 session, McGhee moved further from Washington's policies and towards a more militant agenda. He found company with W.E.B. Dubois, a professor at Atlanta University, who shared McGhee's contempt for Washington's stranglehold on the Black civil rights agenda.

In June of 1905, largely at McGhee's prodding, Dubois convened the first meeting of the Niagara Movement, a groundbreaking organization independent of white support that would use the courts and other means necessary to challenge segregation practices. In its 1906 National Address, the Niagara Movement laid out its agenda.

**FREDRICK MCGHEE:** In the past year, the work of the Negro has flourished in the land. Step by step, the defenders of the rights of American citizens have retreated. The work of stealing the Black man's ballot has progressed, and the 50 and more representatives of stolen votes still sit in the nation's capital.

Discrimination in travel and public accommodations has so spread that some of our weaker brethren are actually afraid to thunder against colored discrimination as such and are simply whispering for ordinary decencies. Against this, the Niagara Movement eternally protests.

We will not be satisfied to take one jot or title less than our full manhood rights. We claim for ourselves every single right that belongs to a free-born American, political, civil, and social. And until we get these rights, we will never cease to protest and assail the ears of America.

**LORNA BENSON:** Like so many other civil rights organizations before it, the Niagara Movement was stunted by a lack of funding and internal political division. It also struggled against the powerful Booker T. Washington's attempts to crush the group. The Niagara Movement stumbled, but a new organization incorporated much of its philosophical policies, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

In 1912, McGhee attended the NAACP conference in Chicago. When he returned to the Twin Cities, he helped lay the groundwork for the local chapter of the NAACP, what would be the nation's second oldest branch. Months before his death, McGhee considered his legacy at a dinner party held in his honor.

**FREDRICK  
MCGHEE:**

When the lips now speaking are laid in the grave, I hope that my brothers will gather themselves as you are gathered tonight and say, he lived, tried to be right, tried to help the race, and trying to be right and trying to help the race, he died.

Then I would need no monument, then I will need no flowers for I will have built in your hearts and memories a monument more lasting than any monument in gold or bronze, in brass or stone could be, to have you tell your children even as you have told me that my life was worth its living and my day has been spent in service of others as well as myself. The flowers I want as I lay on deathbed are these words, that I deserved well of my fellow man.

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**LORNA  
BENSON:**

In 1912, Frederick McGhee died of pneumonia. He was 50 years old. Apart from a few local historians and NAACP activists, McGhee is forgotten to history. But the ideas he helped articulate in the Niagara Movement would help defeat legalized segregation more than four decades after his death.

Our story on Frederick McGhee was produced by Annie Feidt and Dan Gorenstein with help from Sasha Aslanian. It was edited by Stephen Smith. Voice work was provided by T. Mychael Rambo, James Craven, and Perry Carter.

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