

## **THE MYTH-BUSTING HISTORY OF EDNA GRIFFIN**

By Katy Swalwell & Jennifer Gallagher

**Grade Level:** 5-12

This lesson works best with students whose previous social studies education has exposed them to the traditional narrative of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement.

**Guiding Question:** How does the life of Edna Griffin challenge the traditional narrative of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement?

**Supporting / Supplemental Questions:**

What is the traditional narrative of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement?

Why does the traditional narrative persist?

What are the consequences of the traditional narrative?

What are counterclaims to the myths of the traditional narrative?

How does the history of Edna Griffin provide evidence of counter-claims?

**Objectives:**

1. Students will be able to create claims of counternarratives to the traditional narrative of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement.
2. Students will be able to provide evidence from the life of Edna Griffin that support their counter-claims.
3. Students will be able to identify ways in which the traditional narrative helps to perpetuate the racist status quo.

**Procedures:**

- 1) Students will brainstorm what they know or believe to be true about the U.S. Civil Rights Movement by filling out a story map (p.6) of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. They will use their story maps to help them participate in a discussion of the following teacher-posed questions that correspond to Civil Rights myths. This can be a whole group or small group discussion:
  - a) When did the U.S. Civil Rights Movement occur?
  - b) Where did the U.S. Civil Rights Movement take place?
  - c) Who was important in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement?
  - d) What victories did the U.S. Civil Rights Movement win and what strategies did they use?
  - e) Why were people participating in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement?

- 2) During the discussion of their story maps, the teacher should aggregate the responses to articulate the “five myths” that are foundational to the traditional Civil Rights Movement narrative, possibly highlighting each on the board as they come up in the discussion.
  - a) It occurred between 1954-1968.
  - b) It took place in the South.
  - c) Change depended on national leaders.
  - d) The passage of legislation indicated victory from spontaneous protests.
  - e) Events within the Civil Rights Movement were unaffected by other global and national contextual factors.
- 3) The teacher will then transition from those myths to the historical case study of the lesson, Edna Griffin. “Here is some history that is going to call us to question this narrative. I am going to share one case with you. Afterwards, we will return to this narrative so see if you think any points of these myths should be changed.”
- 4) Students will analyze historical resources from the Edna Griffin Dossier (pp. 8-14) in order to fill out the [MythBuster Graphic Organizer](#) (p. 7)
  - a) **Option A (Middle School to High School):** In pairs, students will explore the Edna Griffin dossier to determine how her life story challenges each of the traditional narrative myths. Middle school teachers may opt to fill in the traditional narrative myths as a class in the left column during their opening discussion and then explore each resource together helping students to identify the evidence of counter claims each resource provides. Students could also explore the dossier in pairs, creating counter-claims to the traditional narrative myths on their own while also citing the resources that provide evidence of their claim. Before allowing the pairs to analyze on their own, the teacher should be sure to encourage students to look at the source and date of each resource as they explore the dossier and complete this task.
  - b) **Option B (Upper High School):** Older students could be assigned the [Annals of Iowa](#) article (See References) to read on their own and could fill in the myth busting graphic organizer independently as they read or fill it in with a partner after reading.
- 5) The teacher should bring the class back together and lead a discussion of what counter claims they could make to the traditional narratives of the civil rights movement and where they found evidence of those claims in the documents. See Key Ideas for Educators to scaffold the analysis and discussion for students.
- 6) As a final assessment, students will will provide a verbal or written response to the following questions:
  - a) How does Edna Griffin’s life story challenge each dimension of the traditional narrative? (See Key Ideas for Educators on p.15-16)

- b) Which dimension of the traditional narrative do you think her life story most challenges and why?
- 7) In a closing discussion, students will share their ideas for why the traditional narrative persists and what the consequences are for its continuation. Important considerations include the ways in which the traditional narrative absolves Northerners from recognizing the ways in which they participate in perpetuating racism, masks the persistence of deep structural racism by focusing on individual acts of discrimination, and downplaying the importance of generational grassroots social movements in favor of highlighting a few heroic national figures.

**Extension Activities:**

Ask students to research other local or regional figures whose lives complicate or challenge the traditional narrative. Assessment ideas include asking students to design a way to commemorate their lives and efforts. This could include advocating for their ideas to local organizations or the city or state government.

## Edna Griffin Dossier

### Resource 1:

#### ***Brief Biography of Edna Griffin***

Edna Griffin, born in Kentucky in 1909, grew up in predominantly White neighborhoods in New Hampshire and Massachusetts. She studied sociology at Fisk University where she met her husband, Stanley, and participated in several protests. She marched against Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia and was arrested for joining teachers on strike. She also joined the Communist Party. After living in several other cities, she and her husband moved to Des Moines, Iowa, in 1947 for Stanley to attend medical school. Within the first year of living in Des Moines, Edna had her first of three children and was elected to leadership positions in the Iowa Progressive Party and the Des Moines branch of the Communist Party. On July 7, 1948, Edna, along with her one year-old daughter and two other African Americans, were denied service at Katz Drug Store when Griffin ordered an ice cream soda. This wasn't the first time Katz had denied service to African Americans and, after this particular incident, Griffin became involved in a decades-long struggle to integrate the counter service by organizing boycotts and protests in downtown Des Moines. Griffin and others then became key players in two successful suits brought against Katz, one a criminal trial that fined Katz \$50 (on Oct 7, 1948) and the other a civil suit in which an all-white jury found in favor of Griffin and awarded her \$1 in damages (on Oct 15, 1949). Edna spent much of the rest of her life as a labor union, anti-war, and racial justice activist. The FBI kept a file on Edna Griffin for 17 years as part of COINTELPRO (COunter INTELLIGENCE PROgram), a covert and often illegal surveillance program intended to infiltrate, discredit, and disrupt Left-leaning domestic political organizations. Edna passed away in 2000.

### Resource 2:

#### ***Iowa Civil Rights Law, passed in 1884 and amended in 1892***

"All persons within this state shall be entitled to the full and equal enjoyment of the accommodations, advantages, facilities, and privileges of inns, restaurants, chophouses, eating houses, lunch counters, and all to her places where refreshments are served, public conveyances, barber shops, bathhouses, theaters, and all other places of amusement.

Any person who shall violate the provisions . . . (of the preceding section) by denying to any person, except for reason by law applicable to all persons, the full enjoyment of any of the accommodations, advantages, facilities, or privileges enumerated therein, or by aiding or inciting such denial, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor . . ."

(Iowa Civil Rights Commission, 2015)

### Resource 3:

***Correspondence between James B. Morris, president of the Des Moines branch of the NAACP, to Roy Wilkins at the national (NAACP) office, April 29, 1944***

“Our greatest trouble is to get people to file charges against the concerns following the practice and having them appear in court to prosecute the case. We have reminded the people that they cannot expect us to follow a case through unless they are willing to do their part.”

-James B. Morris

**Resource 4:**

***Letter to the Editor, published in Iowa Bystander on Dec. 1, 1949***

“Experience indicates that court action alone has not and cannot stop jim crow because the penalty exacted under the law is not sufficiently heavy.”

“...[We invite] every citizen in Des Moines, both Negro and white, to join us at lunch between the hours of 11:00 a.m. and 2p.m. each Saturday until the jim crow policy is abandoned” - Edna Griffin, John Bibbs & Kenny Walker

**Resource 5:**

***Protest Signs***

*Counter Service for Whites Only*

*This is Hitler's Old Baloney*

*Don't Buy at Katz*

*The Bullets Weren't for Whites Only*

*Don't Buy at Katz*

**Resource 6:**

***Excerpts from a Pamphlet handed out by Griffin outside Katz Drug Store***

BILL OF RIGHTS—HITLER FAILED BUT KATZ IS TRYING

A lawsuit is pending against Katz Drugstore but we want you to know why Jim Crow undermines the rights of every citizen, not just the victims.

The “master race” idea poisons the mind with hate, distrust, and suspicion. This turns the minds of the people from high prices, low wages, and no housing to violence against one another. It happened in Germany, and it can happen here.

**Resource 7:**

***Excerpt from Iowa Progressive Party Platform, 1948***

“[We demand an] all-out fight against every manifestation of economic, social, and political discrimination on the basis of race, color, creed, sex, national origin, political beliefs or union membership.”

**Resource 8:**

***Edna Griffin to James T. McCain, 9/14/1963, CORE Papers (microfilm), University of Iowa Law Library, Iowa City***

“We would appreciate very much as we plan to deal with discrimination in eating places which we thought we had straight. Our first sit-in took place here in 1949 under my direction.”

**Resource 9:**

***Excerpts from an Interview with Edna Griffin’s Daughter, Phyllis Griffin, 2004***

*Quote 1:*

PG: Definitely. Oh definitely. I think she was encouraging non-violence. Which, I think, you know, in terms of the Black Panther Party, and um, it was hard for the Black Panthers in Des Moines to really listen to that, you know, why should we not protect ourselves, why, you know, we have a right to guns, you know, the whole romance of it. Um, I think it was very difficult for them to hear her on that issue. It wasn’t about the guns...there’s more important stuff that needed to be attended to. One of them had to do with opening up a book and reading one’s history.

*Quote 2:*

PG: It was too young for me to remember. And by the time I was aware of what was happening, a lot of people were very proud of her. Some people were afraid of her, because of the labeling.

NL: Those who were afraid would have been other members of the black community?

PG: Mhm. It wasn’t until she started to be strongly acknowledged by um, powerful people within the white community that the black community relaxed a bit.

*Quote 3:*

NL: And your mother participated in World War II, is that correct? As a WAC?

PG: Yes, yes she was.

NL: Do you think that had an influence on her, um, activism?

PG: Yes, I think it, I think it helped to, it grounded her as an American citizen. She was not a proponent of, quote, going back to Africa. She was a proponent of participation in the

democratic process. We too, share in the building of America, we are part of it, an important part of it, why should we go back to Africa? Not to say that she wasn't opposed to being in Africa, but that the struggle needed to be here now, on this continent.

*Quote 4:*

PG: I think that, being middle class and being one of the few African American middle class people in Des Moines, Iowa that it did have bearing. And it was provided by my father. There were different ways, I think that, um, people tried to reduce her importance, tried to reduce my father's importance. Because people are fearful when it comes to change, thinking differently.

NL: W.E.B. DuBois used the term, "talented tenth." Do you think that your mother and father would have considered themselves part of the talented tenth? Would that have been part of their vernacular?

PG: Um, I think they knew they were privileged financially, which meant that they had an obligation to give back to the community. And I don't think they agreed with DuBois about being above, and DuBois himself later gave up on that, felt it was a mistake to think along those lines. We had, we had, people sat at our table that were very, very very poor farmer to middle class farmer. We had people at our table who were miners of like, Virginia, or West Virginia, coal miners. Sharecroppers.

From Edna Griffin's papers at the U of I:

<http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/aawiowa/id/3179/rec/7>

**Resource 10:**

***Photographs of Edna Griffin***

<http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/aawiowa/id/3147/rec/1>

Resource 10: ColIntelPro File from the FBI

FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION			
Form No. 1 THIS CASE ORIGINATED AT		OMAHA, NEBRASKA	
		OM FILE NO. 100-4095	
REPORT MADE AT OMAHA, NEBRASKA	DATE WHEN MADE 9-22-50	PERIOD FOR WHICH MADE 6-19; 7-11, 27; 9-12, 14-50	REPORT MADE BY [Redacted] b7C FH
TITLE EDNA MAY GRIFFIN, aka, Mrs. Stanley Griffin, Edan May Williams		CHARACTER OF CASE INTERNAL SECURITY - C 4-1 9-11-1	
SYNOPSIS OF FACTS: Subject elected State Vice Chairman of the Iowa Progressive Party. Subject active in securing signatures on peace petition to outlaw atomic bomb and "Let us Stay Out of Korea."			
- P -			
DETAILS:		ALL INFORMATION CONTAINED HEREIN IS UNCLASSIFIED DATE 02-21-2006 BY AUC 60309 TAM/DCG/JW	
AT DES MOINES, IOWA			
<p>An article appearing in the "Des Moines Register" dated Monday June 19, 1950, indicated that EDNA GRIFFIN was the newly elected Party State Vice Chairman of the Iowa Progressive Party and would stump the State during the Summer of 1950 in behalf of TERRY LEE SIMMS, Sioux City negro sentenced to forty years in prison on a rape charge in January 1949.</p> <p>[Redacted] Des Moines, Iowa, advised on July 11, 1950 that she was a speaker at a meeting at Grand View Danish College in Des Moines, Iowa around July 7, 1950. She declared that upon leaving the college she saw a negro woman and a white woman standing beside a folding card table taking signatures on a peace petition. She advised that this petition was captioned, "I Want Peace," "Let's Outlaw the Atomic Bomb," and "Let Us Stay Out of Korea."</p>			
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COINTELPRO file from <http://diyhistory.lib.uiowa.edu/items/show/4199>

Resource 11: Newspaper article about Griffin's support for Shirley Chisholm:



<http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/aawiowa/id/3140/rec/5>

**Resource 12:**  
**Photograph of Katz picket**



<http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/aawiowa/id/3140/rec/5>

**Resource 13:**  
**Transcript from Civil Trial, October 1949**

"Mrs. Griffin has paid the price to have the honor to walk the streets of this community respected. She is a graduate of one of the leading Negro universities in America and was doing graduate work at Drake University at the time. She is the wife of one of the leading doctors in this city—who is a professor at Still College. She is a *mother*." - Charles P. Howard, lawyer representing Griffin

**Resources**

Iowa Civil Rights Commission. (2015). *Iowa Civil Rights Toolkit*. Accessed at:  
<https://icrc.iowa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/2016/Civil%20Rights%20Toolkit%20updated.pdf>

Kohl, H. (1991). The politics of children's literature: The story of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott. *The Journal*

*of Education*, 173(1), 35-50.

Lawrence, Noah. "Since it is my right, I would like to have it: Edna Griffin and the Katz Drug Store Desegregation Movement." *The Annals of Iowa* 67 (2008), 298-330. Available at: <http://ir.uiowa.edu/annals-of-iowa/vol67/iss4/3>

#### Key Ideas for Educators:

1) *Myth: The Civil Rights Movement occurred between 1954-1968.*

Counter Claim and Evidence: Edna Griffin's most famous activism took place in the early 1940s during a sit-in and subsequent court case that desegregated businesses in Iowa. The post-war 1940s was an important era in the movement that saw a transition from upper- and middle- class individuals using social events for elites to inspire change towards more youth-oriented nonviolent and grassroots movements (e.g., sit-ins, boycotts, marches). However, many historians argue the "long civil rights movement" really has lasted from the beginning of the slave trade until the present. (Evidence of 1940's activism in most resources and some post-1960's activism in Resource 11)

2) *Myth: The Civil Rights Movement only took place in the South.*

Counter Claim and Evidence: Most of Edna Griffin's activism took place in Iowa. Activism took place across the country throughout the long civil rights movement. (Evidence of Northern Activism in Most Resources)

3) *Myth: Changes accomplished during the time period depended on national leaders.*

Counter Claim and Evidence: Edna Griffin was not alone in the sit-in and was affiliated with the Progressive Party, the Communist Party, and the NAACP for many years. (Evidence in Resources 1, 3, 4, 7 and 9).

4) *Myth: The passage of civil rights legislation indicated victory from spontaneous protests.*

Counter Claim and Evidence: The Iowa Civil Rights Act had been passed in 1884. The court case inspired by the sit-in that finally enforced this legislation took place several decades later. The sit-in was also planned in advance as a strategy for launching a challenge in the courts and was accompanied by pickets and boycotts. (Evidence in Resources 1, 2, 3,4, 5, 6)

5) *Myth: Participants in the movement focused exclusively on racism in the United States.*

Counter Claim and Evidence: Although the primary focus for many organizations and individuals was on ending racial segregation and discrimination, Edna Griffin and others saw connections between fights against racism in the U.S. with labor, anti-war, and anti-imperialist movements. (Evidence in Resources 1 & 7).

- 6) *Myth: Ideas for enacting change during the Civil Rights Movement were unanimously held and supported by institutions and the majority of citizens.*

Counter Claim and Evidence: There were complex and different ideas and strategies for enacting change during this time period. Civil Rights Activist Organizations sometimes vehemently opposed the ideas and strategies of other groups. Regardless, many institutions and individuals resisted any changes to segregation. Resources mention how Edna Griffin navigated different strategies suggested by the NAACP, the Progressive Party, and the Black Panthers. (Evidence in Resource 9).

- 7) *Myth: Events within the Civil Rights Movement occurred within a vacuum and were unaffected by the national and global context.*

Counter Claim and Evidence: The national and global context affected both the strategies used by the civil rights advocates and those who opposed them. For example, the association of civil rights advocates with communism was a tactic to discredit civil rights causes within the pretext of the Cold War. Additionally, events from World War 2, still fresh in the national memory, were also used strategically through the narratives that protestors used, for example linking segregation with the ideas of Hitler. (Evidence in 5, 6, & 12).