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Mildred Johnson Speaks

AUTHOR MILDRED JOHNSON'S ARTICLE "MILDRED JOHNSON SPEAKS" WILL APPEAR IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF THE FREDERICK DOUGLASS VOICE.

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November 28, 1977

Mr. Howard W. Coles
98 Atkinson Street
Rochester, New York
Dear Howard:

Please excuse me for not writing sooner. I want to thank you for your very active participation throughout our proceedings. You have been very valuable to us for so many years, and our friendship over the years to me has been priceless. The community is very fortunate to have someone like yourself, not only the Black community, but the entire community. You have shared your knowledge with all of us and for this we are most grateful. Over the years, I have learned many things, and one of them is that it cost nothing to be understanding. I took this into consideration when I hired you, Attilio and the late Mr. Fogel. You people have been with

me since I started, and I can not thank you enough for standing by me, throughout the years. Many people that I have come to know over the years have been blessed with many different things. Some with good fortune, families and the like. I am thankful for being blessed with good health, and good friends, the things that cannot be purchased. You have contributed more to the entire Black experience than anyone that I have ever met. Your honesty and dedication to this cause as well as others, will never go unrecognized.

If there is anything that I can ever do for you just let me know, and again, thank you for all of your help.

Very truly yours,
Gordon P. Brown
General Manager

—"CRUCIFIED LIKE THEE"—



DR. R. NATHANIEL DETT

Lived with Music and his people

—by Howard Coles

For centuries past, every nation and race of recognized ability and merit included in the world's history has taken pride in reverting to some outstanding feature of its existence: pointing to some particular event, type of culture or accomplishment which in turn has added to its national glory and made its people known to the world.

When word reached me at my desk today of the passing of Dr. Nathaniel Dett, a great musician, a fine artist and a true friend and neighbor, I thought of another great Rochesterian, Frederick Douglass, who did so much for his people and it seemed to me that another great American had joined him in that immortal hall of fame, for the black man throughout the world can point with justifiable pride and esteem to the life and character of our own Dr. Dett.

While we here in Rochester mourn with the rest of the world the passing of this renowned figure, another group of citizens in another commonwealth of another country 95 miles to the west of us (Niagara Falls, Ontario in the Dominion of Canada) also mourn the loss of their favorite son who first saw the light of day a short way from the mighty grandeur of that miracle of miracles, Niagara Falls.

We here in the city of his adoption think of him as the traveler standing at the base of a high mountain who viewing for the first time its lofty peak as it towers above him feels his insignificance. He scans its rugged sides with an irresistible desire to know what is hidden at its summit. Not content to stand looking upward, he must mount and explore with no realization of the obstacles to be encountered but with determined purpose, he prepares to ascend.

This but epitomizes life from the cradle to the grave. Real life is a struggle, an activity, a will to execute. Life is as the mountain, having its base, its rugged sides and its summit.

And now looking back over a period of some 60 years, we visualize three whose lives were real in their activity; three who have indelibly impressed themselves upon his memory; whose energy and best abilities were exerted to make his life what it should be; who gave him a home where wisdom and industry went hand in hand; where instruction was given that a cultivated brain and an industrious hand were the twin conditions that led to a well balanced life.

In these three lives were embodied the personalities of Robert Tue Dett, his father; Mrs. Dett, his mother and Mrs. Harriet Washington, his grandmother. Just beyond the majestic bridge between Niagara Falls, U.S.A. and Niagara Falls, Canada there is the little

town once called Drummondsville which has since become a part of Niagara Falls, Canada. It was here on October 11, 1882 R. Nathaniel Dett was born of an American father (Reisterstown, near Baltimore, Md.) and a Canadian mother (Niagara Falls, Ontario), both of whom were well educated and musical.

Learnings Toward Music

The entrance into the field of music of Dr. Dett as a boy was



DR. DETT

rather auspicious. At an early age, from listening to his mother who played the piano, he had learned to play the piano by ear. It soon became apparent, however, at the beginnings of his formal music education, that he would have to learn to play by notes. His two elder brothers were taking music lessons and their teacher discovered one day that the real talent was present in their younger brother whom she offered to instruct free of charge. It came about in this manner. Young Dett had accompanied his two older brothers to the home of their music teacher and through observation and a natural ear for music, had learned to play by ear many of his brothers' pieces. On many occasions, he had the habit of slipping up onto the piano stool whenever the teacher left the room, satisfying his desire to "make music" and slipping down when he heard the teacher returning. In these moments at the piano, a new world was opened up before the eyes of this young musician and since those days of his childhood, he has been making music: the world has listened and been enriched by what it heard. His early musical education was presided over by his mother who had a very unique method of teaching him to read notes. This was by the use of a small switch which when young Dett failed to play the right note was brought down with a degree of force on his fingers. It was not long before he learned to play the notes right.

During the late 80's the Dett family moved to Niagara Falls, U.S.A. Here he was given the

opportunity to continue his music under the instruction of Professor John Weiss, an Austrian, and later at the Oliver Halstead Conservatory in Lockport, N.Y. Prof. Weiss was a strict disciplinarian who taught Dett the first movements of the Beethoven "Sonata in F Minor" as well as the significance of the printed musical terms; and the young musician added to his repertoire such classics as Haydn's "Gypsy Rondo," the "Poet and Peasant Overture" and others.

While at the Halstead Conservatory, he received special instruction in technique and musical interpretation. At the end of the school year, he was sufficiently well versed to give a recital. The hinted sweetness of the challenge aroused him and when the eventful hour arrived, he let those beautifully sensitive hands glide gracefully over the keys and an extraordinary look of innocence and simplicity marked his countenance as he played from memory Chopin's "Nocturne in G Minor," Beethoven's "Sonata in F Major," MacDowell's "To The Sea" and "Sea Song," Schumann's "Soaring." At an early age, Dett had begun to put into poetry and music the faint stirrings of his young soul, the impressions of every-day life and these pieces he modestly offered at his first recital.

Making His Way

Young Dett had stood at the base of the mountain; had proved he was anxious to explore and now was ready to start scaling the rugged sides toward the summit and the fulfillment of his dreams. During the eventful years of his youth, time had passed unnoticed and he hadn't thought much about money. Now he knew he must begin to make his own way and also if possible help out at home. First he tried selling papers; later he took a job as hallman at the famous and historic Cataract Hotel, amid the spendthrift grandeur of the old world that young Dett waylaid Destiny and bid him and deliver. It was here a short way from the rumblings and roarings of the great Falls where the great and wealthy came to enjoy the never ending miracle, that opportunity beckons to the young musician. Here before many weeks had rolled by, he was entertaining the guests at the piano rather than smashing baggage, carrying ice water and the usual chores of the average bell-hop. And the manager of the hotel being quite sympathetic, never required him to perform the usual tasks. The boy musician was in his element when playing for the guests and it was while employed thusly that he met Dr. Hoppe of Berlin, Germany who after hearing him play took quite a liking to him. He proved to be a musical enthusiast and well acquainted with the works of the old Masters. He told young Dett that he was very interested in the various types of music, particularly Negro and American Indian, and that he felt that in years to come, this music would come into its own.

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121st Anniversary Douglass Paper

THE FREDERICK DOUGLASS VOICE

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Frederick Douglass

July 27 - 31,
1984



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Dr. R. Nathaniel Dett

From page 1

It was at this point in his career that Dett began to pay more attention to the Negro spiritual which he had often heard his grandmother sing. Shortly after these incidents, a former classmate (white) returned to the city in triumph as a famous artist. Young Dett attended the recital given by this young man; in fact, it was held at the Cataract Hotel and Dett actually arranged the chairs in the beautiful ballroom of this establishment. The next time he arranged chairs for a recital in that room, it was for his own recital which was a great success. He was assisted on the program by his mother and another young colored woman. The proceeds of this concert were used to pay his tuition at Oberlin.

At Oberlin

There were a number of outstanding Americans who recognized in young Dett a musician and composer of promise and they backed their convictions by contributing financially to his musical education. Among them were Dr. Frederick Goff, late president of the Cleveland Trust Company and George Foster Peabody.

At Oberlin, Dett studied under the distinguished Howard Handel Carter, a classmate of the famous Theodore Presser who had previously studied in Europe. Professor Carter taught Dett special choral works from Bach and other great masters. He studied theory under Professor Arthur Heacock, and became one of the most popular students on the campus as well as one of the busiest. For four years he enjoyed studying under these men who had taken such great interest in him. Later he studied under Professor George C. Hastings and did work in composition under Dr. George W. Andrews to whom he became very devoted and in later years paid tribute to the excellent qualities of this man.

Launching His Career

At last, Graduation Day! This was the Day of Days for Dr. Dett, for he was graduated cum laude from Oberlin; the head of his class. But like most great students, he wanted to acquire more knowledge and later studied at Columbia University, University of Pennsylvania, American Conservatory of Music and Harvard University.

While at Oberlin, he had the pleasure of hearing many famous artists and choral groups, among them the Kneisel String Quartet and this group brought back memories of his grandmother and her singing of the spiritual and created a yearning within him to compose something in this field that would capture the spirit and mood of his people. Shortly afterward, he accepted a position at a Negro school, Lane College, Jackson, Tennessee where he had an opportunity to teach, compose, observe and work with his people. He organized a large choir and collected the words to many Negro spirituals from the old Negro families in the vicinity. From there he went to Lincoln University in Missouri and while there he met an old friend of his family, a colored woman, a great artist, Mme. E. Azalia Hackley who had studied piano and voice abroad. Dr. Dett gives this woman much credit for her work in the field of music, also for her special efforts in his and other Negro students' behalf in seeing that they received special musical training.

Dr. Dett has often said that it was Mme. Hackley who put the Negro spiritual on top by traveling throughout the South, organizing large choirs and school clubs to teach them spirituals, fostering a pride and respect for one of their greatest contributions to American music and erasing forever from the minds of the people whatever stigma might have attached itself to the idea of the spiritual.

It was through the efforts of this same woman that Dr. Dett went to Hampton Institute in 1913, as director of music and the choir. Here he made history with his student choir for it was one of the first student choirs ever to be invited to sing at the Elizabeth Coolidge Festivals at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

In 1929 Dr. Dett and the choir went abroad on what was known as a Goodwill Tour. They toured seven countries, being lavishly received wherever they went. They were welcomed by the Lord Mayor at Plymouth and received by Premier MacDonald, his daughter Isahel, and English nobility. In Belgium, they were received by the Queen and the audiences were delighted with the singing of the great choir. They went to Paris, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, the Hague, Vienna, Antwerp, Hamburg, Berlin and Dresden; everywhere their excellent artistry was acclaimed by critics and audiences alike. They sang not only the Negro spiritual with grace and dignity, but were equally at home with the classical a cappella numbers of the great masters and present day composers. The great Dr. Dett and choir had indeed come a long way.

Theirs was a real contribution toward good will and a better appreciation of the American Negro and his capabilities.

The Spiritual Lives

I remember distinctly on one occasion having attended a recital here in Rochester and afterward I asked Dr. Dett what he thought of the part of the program where the artist sang several spirituals. He replied, "The voice was excellent, but the spiritual isn't sung that way. There is a certain poignancy in it without which a spiritual can never be interpreted."

Dr. Dett loved the spiritual and he spent many hours listening to them being sung in the South, the land of their nativity by descendants of old slaves. Here he captured the emotions of his people when they were moved by the spirit, here he lived all over again the anguish of the down-trodden slave; here he answered the appeal of his forefathers to preserve this music, to make it live again in the hearts of men and women everywhere. His inspiration was born among these lowly surroundings and here many of his pieces were composed. He saw too this rich heritage being handed down to the Negro children through the Negro schools, the church meetings, at wakes, the road gang of convicts, at weddings, and funerals, here he lived with music. He greatly admired such artists as Harry T. Burleigh, Clarence Cameron White, Rosamund Johnson, Paul Robeson, Carl Ditt, Hall Johnson, Marian Anderson, William Dawson, and his own discovery and protege, Dorothy Maynor, for keeping alive the Negro spiritual.

His Compositions

Pressing cares absorbed him during the ensuing years, but they were years of inspiration.

In pursuing the list of his compositions, one's eye is attracted by titles whose suggestions would at once proclaim their inspiration as being outside things racial, evidencing the fact that here is a "Negro composer who has something to say for himself as well as for his people." Thus speaks one music critic after hearing some of his works.

Such compositions as "O Holy Lord," "Music in the Mine," "Gently Lord, O Gently Lead Us," "Listen to the Lambs," "As by the Streams of Babylon," "Album of a Heart," "The Magnolia Suite" (for piano), "In the Bottoms," from which comes the colorful "Juba Dance," "Cinnamon Grove Suite," "The Chariot Jubilee," (motets; i.e., musical compositions of a sacred nature consisting of from one to eight parts); "America the Beautiful," (chorus); "Enchantment Suite" for piano; "The Ordering of Moses," and oratorio which was written while he studied under Dr. Howard Hanson of the Eastman School of Music, Rochester, and was first performed by the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Eugene Goossens.

Robert Kerlin says in his book "Negro Poets and their Poems," "There is perhaps in all the realm of contemporary American musical history no name which occupies a more unique place than Dr. Dett. To sit under the spell of his performances of his own pieces is to get a new idea of the Negro people."

Singers like Marian Anderson, Caroline Hudson-Alexander, Florence Coe Talbert, Kathryn Meisle, Roland Hayes, Stanley Hoban and Reinald Werrenrath have been able to witness the ratification of their choice of such songs.

Special Honors and Commissions

In 1920, Dr. Dett was awarded the Bowdoin Prize at Harvard for his essay, "The Emancipation of Negro Music." The same University gave him the Francis Booth prize for "America the Beautiful." In 1934, he was commissioned by the City of Rochester to write the music for the Rochester Centennial, a Century of Progress. At his studio on East Ave. in this city he gave special instructions to some of Rochester's leading musicians and teachers. During this same period, he organized the American Choir (white), was featured on a commercial sponsored by the Rochester Gas and Electric Corporation over station WHAM of the National Broadcasting Company.

He also organized the R. Nathaniel Dett Chorus, an inter-racial group in connection with the local Y.W.C.A.; all these groups were much in demand and made musical history. Besides all this, he found time to train and direct the choir of the Trinity Presbyterian Church (Negro).

In September 1941, he was commissioned again by the City of Rochester to train a mammoth inter-racial choir in preparation for the rededication of the Frederick Douglass Monument which was being moved to Highland Park, one of Rochester's most scenic parks. During this same period, he spent two years as director of music at Bennett College, Greensboro, N.C. While he was at Bennett College, he was represented in the Victor release of recordings of piano music by American composers by the Adagio Cantabile from his

"Cinnamon Grove Suite" played by Jeanne Behrend.

In 1924 Howard University in Washington, D.C., conferred on him the honorary degree of Doctor of Music and in 1926, it was again accorded him by Oberlin Conservatory of Music. He was president of the National Association of Negro Musicians in 1925 and 1926, also was president of the local (Rochester) Branch of the National Association of Colored People at one time and at the time of his death was working on the third and fourth movements of a symphony which the Columbia Broadcasting Company commissioned him to write. He had recently organized at Fort Custer, Michigan, a Negro WAC chorus.

The Poet

Dr. Dett was a poet of no mean ability. He was constantly putting into words and song what he saw and felt. While he was at Hampton, one of his students drew a picture of the Crucifixion and alongside, a picture of a lowly Negro being lynched. Dr. Dett composed this poem to go at the foot of the crosses and years later gave it to me:

"Crucified Like Thee"

Tell me, Thou in anguish leaning
From the cross-barred tree
What parable hides here its meaning
Crucified like Thee?
Neath the mask of wounds,
fire-salted
What does faith conceal?
When shamefully like Thee exalted
What does death reveal?
Mob and outrage! Can these
presage
Meekness' victory?
Enfolds the ruin still a message
Crucified like Thee?

Buys Home In Rochester

I believe it was early in 1934 that Dr. Dett came to Rochester. I remember the difficulties he faced in securing lodgings at a local hotel, but he stuck to his guns and these difficulties of a discriminatory nature were ironed out. Thus he made the road easier for his race here in the city. After residing at the hotel for some time he purchased a home on Plymouth Avenue South, an exclusive white residential section. Here again he met the demon prejudice for there were home owners in this area who objected to a Negro family in their midst, even one of so great a Negro artist; but Dr. Dett kept his eyes on the goal. He stuck it out and won the battle — today, the neighbors point with pride to Dr. Dett's home and are proud to refer to him as a neighbor and friend. His work in the local chapter of the National Negro Congress which he helped organize and the local chapter of the N.A.A.C.P. was outstanding and called forth much favorable comment.

Editorial Comment

Dr. Dett was held in great esteem by local music critics, instructors and musicians of the

Eastman School of Music and the local press. The following editorial taken from the *Democrat and Chronicle* can be used as a criteria:

He Enriched Music

"As an influence in the development of a native musical art, Dr. Robert Nathaniel Dett who is dead at 61, earned his place with the important figures of his generation. He earned that place against the handicaps which the Negro musician faces, he earned it by a great gift for musical expression and a character big enough to persist in spite of discouragements. His music today, particularly his choral music, has a recognized place on the concert platform and in the church choirs.

"Dr. Dett may have been inspired to persist in his professions by the example of his illustrious Negro contemporary, Henry T. Burleigh, whose career and music bear some resemblance to his own. In the adaptation of Negro folk tunes to choral and oratorio forms, Dr. Dett showed a grasp of the mechanics of the chorus and orchestra and a deep instinct for the classic line. Dr. Howard Hanson, director of the Eastman School says he was the first to raise Negro melodies to so high an artistic plane.

"Rochester is complimented by its close association with the career of Dr. Dett. He received his masters degree from the Eastman School, studied under Dr. Hanson, was at one time organist and choir director of Trinity Presbyterian Church, frequently returned here for study and lecture, and had many warm friendships here. He had won distinctions in many parts of the world, accepted them with the modesty of a true artist. His death is a loss to musical art, his music a rich legacy to the cultural progress of the future."

Funeral Services

Funeral services were held on Wednesday, October 7, 1943 in St. Simon's Episcopal Church and the choir which he once directed sang his touchingly beautiful adaptation of the Hebrew chant, "As by the Stream of Babylon."

The Rev. Frank L. Brown, rector of St. Simon's, officiated at the services assisted by Rev. Isaiah P. Pogue, Jr., minister of Trinity Presbyterian Church. Burial was in Niagara Falls, Ontario, his birthplace.

The Bronze Trombones Program, directed by Howard W. Coles, all Negro features of Station WSAW, the Mutual Network Station, devoted its entire program on Sunday, October 10th to a memorial tribute to the life and works of Dr. Dett. At a date to be announced later, a community memorial service will be conducted.

So closed the career of a fine artist and a great man, whose star has set at the zenith, but whose spirit will go on living in the hearts and minds of his people whenever and wherever the music of Robert Nathaniel Dett is played or sung.

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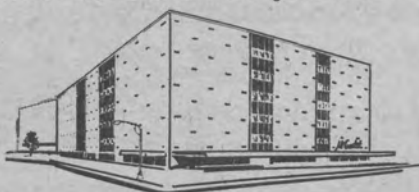


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Former Rochesterian Passes Georgia Bar Exam

Ms. Carla Jeanne Friend, daughter of Mrs. Alyce Kelso Friend and Mr. Charles W. Friend, Sr. was sworn in as a member of the Georgia Bar in Atlanta, GA. on 15 June 1984.

Ms. Friend, a graduate of Madison High School, (class of 1967) received her bachelor's degree from Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina and has a master's degree in psychology from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. For several years, Ms. Friend worked as a health planner in Chicago, Ill., and as a fund raiser with the United Way in Cleveland, Ohio.

In August 1980, Ms. Friend entered George Washington University in Washington, D.C. and received the Juris Doctor degree in May 1983. During summer vacations, she worked with Legal Aid in Atlanta and is presently employed with the Southern Prisoners' Defense Committee in Atlanta, GA.

The FREDERICK DOUGLASS VOICE offers its most sincere congratulations to Ms. Friend and her parents, and wishes her great success in her chosen Profession.

—by Howard C. Coles

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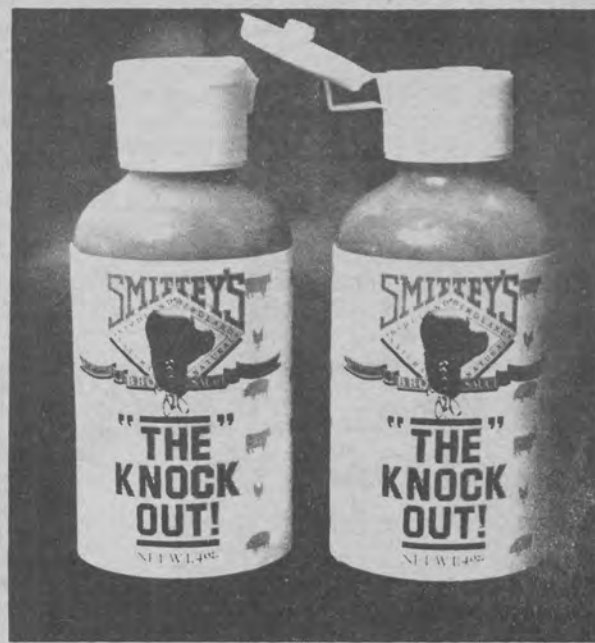
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF EDITOR

Howard W. Coles: Born at Belcoda, N.Y., was graduated from East High School and later was a Sociology Major in the University School of the University of Rochester.

He studied journalism in New York City. Came to Rochester in 1934 and founded the Frederick Douglass Voice Newspaper. In 1940, he was appointed by the Mayor of Rochester to represent the City at the American Negro Exposition in Chicago, and in 1942 was recommended for the Spingarn Medal on the basis of his contribution to the community in the field of social and civic work. He was recommended (honor) by Dr. John Lowe, former director of the Rochester Public Library System.

In 1941, he was historian and publicity director for the City of Rochester — sponsored transfer of the Douglass Monument to Highland Park. His

magnificent expose, "Nomads from the South," which ran serially in the Voice, was responsible for interest in the condition of the migrant worker and subsequent statewide cleanup of labor camps. He is also credited by the New York State Legislature with making the first housing survey in the City of Rochester (1937), and was a member of the City-wide Housing Committee of the City of Rochester for four years, and for eight years was property manager for the Monroe County Savings Bank.

The original Housing Survey compiled by Coles was published in 1939 by the New York State Temporary Commission on the Condition of the Colored Urban Population — To the Legislature of the State of New York — Legislative Document (1939) No. 69.

Here is a quote from the Commission's Report: "Although

Rochester is a very highly organized community in relation to matters concerning social work, social and economic research, etc., it is somewhat backward when viewed in terms of recent trends in programs for adequately housing the population. It was not until very recently that it has manifested an interest in studying the housing conditions facing its population. This interest was undoubtedly given impetus by a sample survey of housing conditions among Rochester Negroes, conducted in 1938 by the Voice Newspaper, and its editor, Howard W. Coles."

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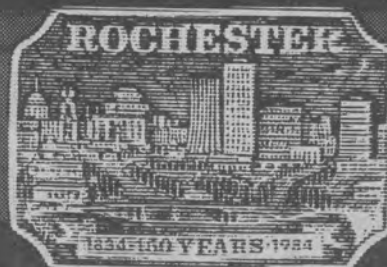
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Rochester City Council Member Ruth Scott

City Council Member Ruth H. Scott, chairperson of Council's Public Safety Committee, today announced that the City has been allocated \$25,000 for expansion of the Police Department's Police & Citizens Teamed Against Crime (PAC-TAC) Program from the State Supplemental Budget through the efforts of Assemblyman Gary Proud.

The funds will help underwrite the costs of equipment and training for citizen patrols in several city neighborhoods, including those served by the Police Department's Goodman, Clinton and Highland sections. PAC-TACs supplement the crime prevention efforts of uniformed officers.

Together with \$35,000 in funds awarded by the State Office of Crime Control Planning, the Supplemental Budget alloca-

tion will enable the Police Department to expand the program citywide by the end of July.

Council Member Scott also announced that the City has received a pledge of 2,000 blue

light bulbs from Empire Electric Supply Co. for the Department's Blue Lite Program. The program allows elderly, handicapped and bedridden citizens in trouble to alert neighbors and police patrols by switching

on a small flashing bulb placed in the front windows of their homes.

Council Member Scott commented that programs like PAC-TAC involving a partnership between police and citi-

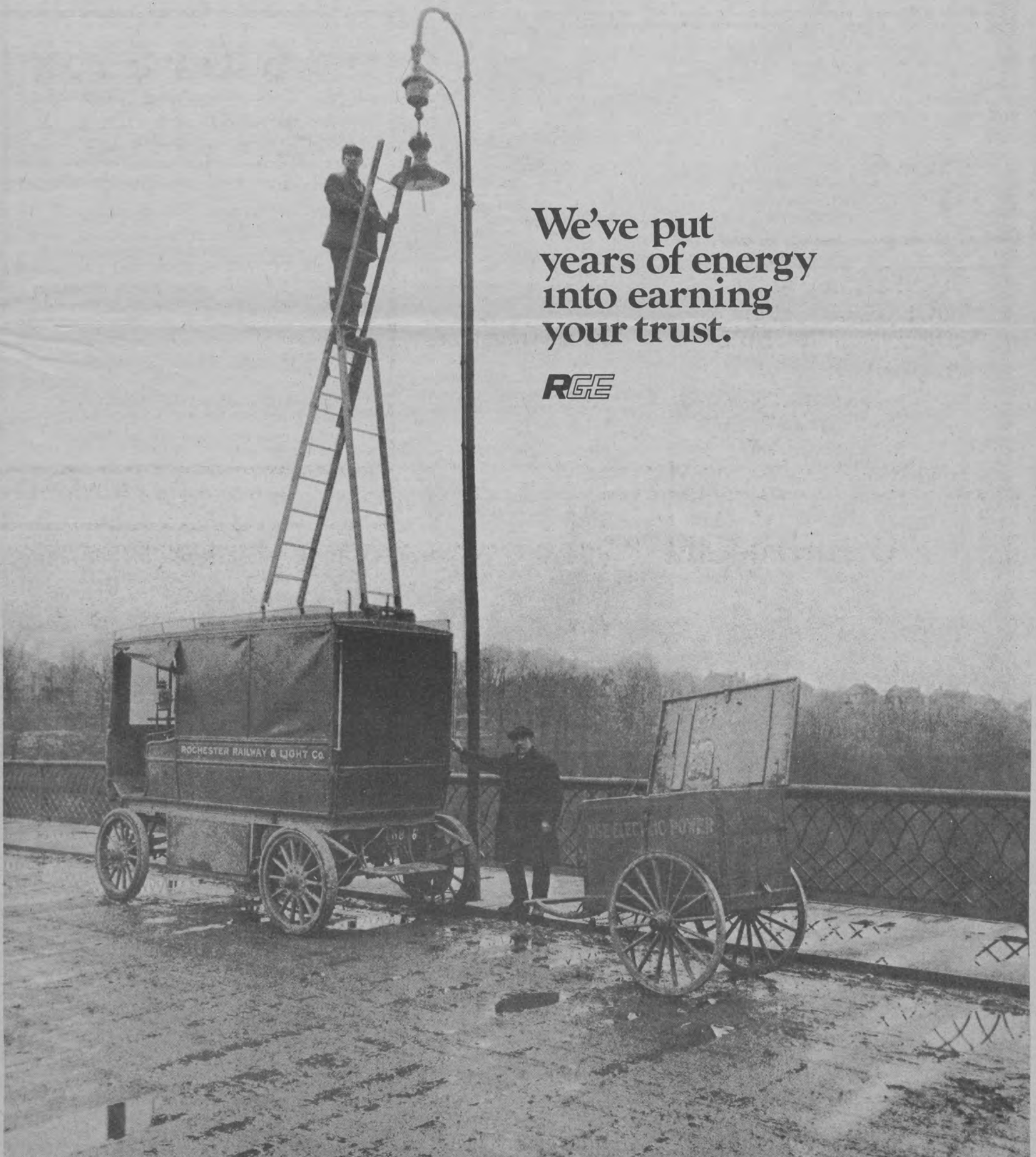
zens and the cooperation of private sector firms like Empire Electric deserve much of the credit for reductions in city crime statistics over the past few years.

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