

Kreamo Bakery Boycott

In 1964, a determined group of activists boycotted a local bread company, Kreamo. Until that point, Kreamo had never intentionally hired any African American people.

Few details were recorded about the incident. It was not covered at all by the reporters at the *South Bend Tribune*. Only one mention can be found in a 1964 letter to the editor by Willie Green Jr. He wrote, “People in South Bend have developed a stereotyped image concerning the occupation Negroes are best suited for, and efforts are made to keep Negroes within the image. Several weeks ago, the Kreamo Bakery of South Bend [broke] forty years of tradition when the company employed two Negroes for very good jobs.”

The Oral History Collection of the Indiana University South Bend Civil Rights Heritage Center contains several interviews with local people who remembered the boycott.

In 2003, Civil Rights Heritage Center Student Historian David Healey interviewed Ralph Miles and asked him about the boycott. Mr. Miles replied, “The biggest employer of Blacks was Studebaker and Bendix at the time, but it was hard to get into places like Kreamo Bakery because all they had was basically whites. Everybody decided that they were not gonna buy Kreamo bread because Kreamo Bread Group was not gonna hire Blacks.”

In an era before instant digital communication, encouraging people to participate in a boycott required other tools. As Mr. Miles remembered, “They went door-to-door. There was a pamphlet.” In her 2003 oral history interview, Cheryl Ashe remembered her mother Theresa using the telephone to call other local women and encourage them not to buy Kreamo bread. As Ms. Ashe recalled, “Every week, she had a list of names she called to remind them about. ‘Hi, this is Theresa Ashe. Remember, when you go shopping this week, don’t buy Kreamo bread.’”

Tools like phone trees, where one person calls a set amount of people and they each in turn call others, were effective means of mass communication long before social media. Ms. Ashe remembered, “My mom could tell Marilyn, ‘Remember Kreamo Bakery.’ And then Marilyn had her own core of people she could call.”

A principal organizer of the boycott was prominent doctor and activist Roland Chamblee. Dr. Chamblee met with the President of Kreamo about their choice not to hire African American people. Dr. Chamblee recalled, “He said that nobody in his family had ever had a Black working in the plant since the 1890s, and he didn’t see the reason why he should do it now.”

After that distressing meeting, Dr. Chamblee recalled, “Within two days we had organized and printed leaflets, and we covered South Bend passing out leaflets asking the people not to buy Kreamo Bread.”

Seeking allies, Dr. Chamblee reached out to Father Theodore Hesburgh of the University of Notre Dame, who bought bread from Kreamo. Father Hesburgh responded, cancelling a contract worth \$2 million today.

The combination of community members asserting their collective buying power coupled with a key ally pulling a lucrative contract finally pressured Kreamo’s leadership to modify their hiring practices. Still, in a two-page advertisement published eight years later, only two people of color, Anna Staples and Leroy Miller, appeared among over fifty employees photographed. It was more than zero, but barely.

For some, the boycott lingered far longer than 1964. Cheryl Ashe recalled going grocery shopping with a friend: “We both were in the bread aisle, and I go reach for Kreamo bread. And [my friend] says, ‘Don’t buy Kreamo bread. Ever since I was a child, I never bought Kreamo bread. I brought it home one time. My grandmother sent me back, and said, ‘Get the money back. Don’t buy Kreamo bread.’”

Forty years distanced from the original boycott, she still held on to that childhood impulse. Her experience, and the Kreamo boycott story as a whole, serves as a powerful example of the lasting impact of community resistance through economic pressure.

Additional resources:

Cheryl Ashe, interview with David Healey, March 6, 2003, Oral History collection, Civil Rights Heritage Center Collections, Indiana University South Bend Archives, <https://archive.org/details/OH-Ashe-Cheryl-2003-03-06>.

Roland Chamblee, interview with David Healey and Mark Honer, June 22, 2005, Oral History collection, Civil Rights Heritage Center Collections, Indiana University South Bend Archives, <https://archive.org/details/OH-Roland-Chamblee-2005-06-22>.
