

# The Black High School Basketball Tournament in West Virginia: Reflections of the Black Experience, 1925-1957

C. ROBERT BARNETT

Marshall University

From the establishment of West Virginia as a state in 1863 until the *Brown vs Board of Education Decision* in 1954, West Virginia had a segregated school system. Likewise a separate athletic governing board, The West Virginia Athletic Union, existed to organize black high school sports.

In 1925, twelve of the states twenty black high schools sent basketball teams to the West Virginia State College campus at Institute for the first black high school basketball tournament. Wheeling Lincoln defeated Kimball 27-23 in the championship game of a three day, double elimination affair which the black weekly *Pittsburgh Courier* (March 28, 1925) pronounced a huge success.

The black high school tournament grew as did the number of black high schools with basketball teams creating the need for regional tournaments by 1934. The four regional tournaments qualified two teams each to the state tournament which was held at either West Virginia State, Bluefield State, or one of the larger high schools.

The tournament continued through the Brown decision in 1954, until 1957 when the remaining black high schools were absorbed by the formerly all white West Virginia Secondary School Activities Commission. Some of the black high schools which continued in existence until 1963 were very successful in the formerly all white tournament.

The black high school tournament in West Virginia was an important event for the scattered black communities, because it represented one of the few opportunities for black people from the small, geographically isolated, black communities in the state to interact with each other. Many of the people interviewed indicated that the WVAU tournament fostered communication among, and reinforced a sense of black pride in the black people of West Virginia.

The paper will be based on a complete reconstruction of the tournament through newspaper accounts, but will focus on reminiscences recorded in more than fifteen interviews conducted with former players, coaches and cheerleaders. Research for the project was funded with the support of the Humanities Foundation of West Virginia.