



# The Black O

*Steve Watkins*

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In 1988 several white managers of the Shoney's restaurant chain protested against the company's discriminatory hiring practices, including an order to blacken the "O" in "Shoney's" on minorities' job applications so that the marked forms could be discarded. When the managers refused to comply, they lost their jobs but not their resolve—they sued the company. Their case grew into the largest racial job discrimination class action lawsuit of its time. Shoney's eventually offered to settle out of court, and the nearly 21,000 claimants divided a \$132.5 million settlement, bringing to an abrupt end a landmark case that changed corporate attitudes nationwide.

*The Black O* is a fascinating, behind-the-scenes story populated with many unforgettable characters, including civil rights lawyer Tommy Warren, the former college football star and convicted felon who took the case; Ray Danner, the ironfisted former CEO who developed the Shoney's concept; and Justice Clarence Thomas, former head of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which sat idly by for years while complaints mounted against Shoney's. *The Black O* speaks to an issue that continues to have great urgency, serving as a stark refutation that the civil rights movement eliminated systemic discrimination from the workplace.

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