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ORAL INTERVIEW
of
REV. PRENTISS WALKER

Edited by
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and
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Transcribed for
The Black Experience in Southern Nevada
Donated Tapes Collection, James R. Dickinson Library
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

ABSTRACT

REV. PRENTISS WALKER, 1910-1977.

Rev. Prentiss Walker recalls Las Vegas from 1933 to the early 1970s. He discusses the equality of opportunity and social acceptance that Blacks enjoyed in Las Vegas in the thirties. He notes that Blacks did not look upon southern Nevada as a place of permanent residence, but rather as a temporary place to earn money quickly. He mentions some early Black families in Las Vegas.

With the coming of the dam, discrimination and segregation came to the Black community. He briefly mentions the effort of the NAACP to obtain jobs for Blacks at Hoover Dam.

He compares an earlier time with its slower pace of life to the insecure and high crime era of the seventies.

Collector: Bernard Timberg
January 27, 1974

INTRODUCTION

Prentiss Walker was born in 1910 on an Indian reservation in Comanche County in southwestern Oklahoma. He was part American Indian. His youth was spent in Stockton, California, and Phoenix, Arizona. In 1933 he came to Las Vegas and remained until his death in 1977.

His work experience was varied, having been employed as a cafe worker; a carpenter at the Mercury Test Site; in a trailer park; in a used car lot; in gambling; in retail sales; and for Dr. MacMillan. In 1956 he was ordained into the ministry of the Baptist Church. He was pastor of the Las Vegas Greater Faith Missionary Baptist Church until his death. His father had been a minister in the Methodist Pentacostal Church.

His wife, Annie Lou Lanier Walker, survived him. They were married in 1968. Rev. Mr. Walker has been married twice previously.

The interview has a narrow focus, the result of research for the production of a program for KLVX TV, Channel 10, PBS. Though the intention was to focus on the era of the mid 1920s, later reminiscences were included.

Differences in the tape and transcription of the interview occur because the typed version has been edited for easier reading. Repetitions and false starts have been eliminated. In some instances, a word or phrase has been added for clarity or correction and enclosed in brackets. There are omissions in the transcript which occurred when the speaker turned from the microphone, was interrupted, or had a lapse of memory.

Rev. Walker's interview is part of a series of interviews in the Donated Tapes Collection of the James R. Dickinson Library of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. The transcription and editing of the interview have been supported in part by a grant to Dickinson Library administered by the U.S. Office of Education, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare through the Nevada State Library; Project Director, Harold H. J. Erickson; Assistant Director, Anna Dean Kepper. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Office of Education and no official endorsement by the U.S. Office of Education should be inferred.

A copy of the transcript will be available at the West Las Vegas Branch of the Clark County Library District and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, New York. A bibliography of Black Experience in Southern Nevada will be distributed statewide.

Written permission to photocopy, to cite or quote from Prentiss Walker's oral interview must be obtained from Special Collections Department, James R. Dickinson Library, University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Elizabeth Nelson Patrick
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
1978

Collector: When you first came out here, what do you remember?

Who was here? What do you know about that?

Walker: I came here in nineteen hundred and thirty-three. I came here due to the fact that all over these United States it was known that they were to build a big dam here. There would be a lot of work and they were going to need a lot of help. Like all the others, I come in due to that fact. I came here from Oklahoma. And when I got here--well, by me being a Negro--there was plenty of work here all right and a lot of people here and a lot of people working, but no Negroes. They were just not hiring them down there at the Hoover Dam and not in any capacity to my knowledge. I think my knowledge is pretty thorough.

There was a person here by the name of Arthur McCants who organized the NAACP to force these people to give Negroes jobs on Hoover Dam. There was no such thing as West Las Vegas as it's constituted now. It wasn't none of that. All Negroes, to my knowledge, lived uptown around First Street, Second Street, Third Street between what is now Fremont and Stewart, back in that neighborhood. Now there might have been a few others that worked on the railroad and for the railroad that lived over in the railroad yards. But, as Negroes are

scattered out all over here now, it just wasn't so.

And incidentally, believe it or not, back in that early day, to my knowledge, we could eat anywhere we want to eat, drink anywhere we want to drink, and gamble off our money any place we want to gamble, that is, if we had any money to gamble or eat with. There was no such thing as "Jim Crow" as such, as we knew it in the forties, the fifties, and the sixties.

Collector: When you came out here, what were the families that already lived out here that you ran into when you went around the Black community?

Walker: Well, they was a family here by the name of Christensens [Christensen] --brothers--which was quite active in the community; Halsman family; and there seemed to me like they was a family here by the name of Stevensons; also Mrs. Hughes. They was a Mrs. Smith who, incidentally, had a daughter that taught school here somewhere in the country. I can't just exactly pinpoint the spot at this time--forty years is a lot to think over. I'm going to tell you that now. I've had so many other things happen since then. I know this town from the time of its very early existence. When you got four or five blocks away from that Union [Pacific] Station--don't care which way you are going--you was back out in the country. This I can remember. I remember real well.

Collector: Do you remember any of those people you met? Do you remember, for instance, the Christensens? What were they like? Did you ever use their services?

Walker: Well, yes. Christensens, the young ones, for a long time I rented a stable from him to keep my horse at. Now, you know, that was for a long time. Mother Stevenson was what everybody called her; everybody knew her. She is what I would call a genuous Christian woman that just everybody in the community thought a lot of. And not only did they think a lot of her, but they went to her with their problems and troubles.

Now there was Mrs. Hughes down there. I remember her and her husband back in the early days. I rented from them many years ago--rented an apartment from them. They are still in the same old place, doing business at the same old stand. To my knowledge, that was the first Negro business here, the only one I know of that was operating then and still operating now. They, of course, have improved it. But it's many times since then. They've got a much better business now than they had at that time. This I can remember.

Collector: This is Mrs. Hughes?

Walker: This was Mrs. Hughes, yeah.

Collector: What did they have; what kind of business?

Walker: They had at that time what I would call a hamburger stand, where they had soda waters, pops, and what have you not. Of course, it's developed into a much different type of business nowadays, but it's still the same old stand, in the same old place. She's a very nice, erect woman-- always has been to my knowledge.

Collector: How did the older residents of the Black community here accept newcomers such as yourself? Were there any problems?

Walker: Well, no, they was no problems. They was all glad to, you know, and see one another; there just wasn't too many of us here to begin with. And those of us that were here most certainly, as the old saying goes, had to be closely associated and affiliated with one another for self protection, if you want to put it that way. And I think we did a pretty good job. That's the way it goes. Of course, the fact of it was that a lot of this people hadn't been used to colored people, because they just wasn't none anywhere too much out here in the West at that time.

Collector: Now, later years, this lady became the first Black woman to teach school in the Clark County Public School District.

Collector: That was who?

Walker: That's Mrs. Mabel Hoggard. This man here, old man Johnson, would run Community Store. Now Community Store originally ain't at where it is now. It used to be back over on Harrison Street. Now he, until very recently-- until he died--why he still owned Community Store. And of course, he was a carpenter by trade also.

Now this man, he's dead and gone too; that's old, old Oscar Hunt. He's another old timer around here, but he's gone on in. What I'm trying to tell you is there's a whole lot of them around here that we can definitely talk about and go into. Now, I think I mentioned somewhere along the line there was a family here by the name of Harris. And I ain't too sure now. Either the Christensens or the Stevensons or the Harrises was among the first Negro families here. Of course, they've been just any number of them come and gone since that time. We have people who have been around here the last ten or twelve years; there's just plenty of them. But when you go back to talking about thirty-five, forty years, why, then you talking about such people as Harvey Jones. You might talk about Alan Sanders or some people like that, but there ain't just too great big many of them been here thirty or forty years that are left--tell you that now.

Collector: You were telling me about the change in the town, the whole community, I guess, both the Westside and the east side, in terms of crime and stuff like that. What do

(garbled)

Walker: Well you take a long time ago, as late as up in the ~~fifti~~ fifties, we didn't have locks on our doors; we didn't need no locks. There were no thieves; nobody stole nothing. We didn't have this problem like what we got today; no, we didn't. Furthermore, like all the contracts and all this here, a person's word was his bond in them days. You dealt with people due to the fact of the character of the individual, if you believed in him or trusted him; otherwise, you didn't. As for all this contracts and all this lawyer's work like we have today and you got to get a paper signed, we didn't have that then. In the early days, we didn't have that because everybody was just glad to be around everybody. And everybody then tried to help one another.

And if you got stranded somewhere out here in the desert, the next person come along didn't leave you like they do now and keep on by you. They didn't do that then, but they do now. They have to because they afraid of you; you don't know why. Now what purpose that person might be stopping out there for? That's what makes this thing like it is.

And you talk about changes in the town? It finally came. I remember when they started building this big plant out here in Henderson. They getting all this other influx of workers back here in the forties and the late thirties.

Well, you begin to notice a change then. It wasn't long before we had to have our own special places to eat; we had to have our own special places to gamble. So then what you know now as West Las Vegas showed up in the picture. Then it went on and on and on until the sixties, until we got what is known now as the Civil Rights Act, or whatever you want to call it.

Then they reverted back to the old original plan that they had here, and that is, come as you are. Everybody go where they want to as long as you act and conduct yourself as a lady or a gentleman. That's all it was originally. That's just doing now what we used to do. We used to do it by choice. Now you do it by law. That's just the only difference in it.

Collector: Do you remember any places you could go into in the thirties which you could not go into in the forties?

Walker: Well, just any place you can name. Well, there ain't too many places up there on Fremont now. The Horseshoe Club. Originally, we could go in there, but you couldn't go in there afterward. The Golden Nugget is another one; and the Sal Sagev; and later on, the Las Vegas Club--you couldn't go in there. Well, just any of them down there. They finally shut their policy down, to comply with all the rest of them's policy.

And what they set up was known under the law as "separate but equal" policy. In other words, they had a right to let who in that they wanted to and make those stay out that they wanted to stay out. And then the Negro had to stay out. Don't care how small he was or how big the Negro was, if he came to Las Vegas, he had to come to West Las Vegas even if he only stay all night. That's just the way it was in the early days, in the forties and fifties.

Well, everybody that came out in the early--nobody was going to stay here. Everybody was here to make a fast buck and get away. And then as time rolled along, we kept going and we kept coming and finally we stayed here; we are still here. And that's how come you see a lot here today. But, I'm here to tell you that they's been a great, great change in this town, that is, from the standpoint of housing, buildings, streets, lighting systems, or anything you want to mention. There's been a world of change here. If you knowed this town, oh, say in the thirties, and you saw it today, you wouldn't believe it was the same town. It just don't look possible. It don't look like that in the twenties and the early thirties they still had planks on the sidewalks and dirt streets Downtown, but they did. And they started paving this stuff here later on.

Collector: In the middle of this modern city what are the problems that a really older person has now?

Walker: Well, the older person has the problem that he is not used to what I'd call "fast life" and the fast pace that people sets. Then he would have to be off to the side. He just couldn't fit into the pattern of things, because the pace is just too fast for him. Not only is the pace too fast for him, but circumstances, conditions, and the people are not the same. Everybody, even almost next-door neighbors to you are strangers to you today. It used to be everybody looked out for everybody; nobody looks out for nobody now. That's the difference.

Collector: Did you know everyone in town when you moved in?

Walker: Oh, earlier, why sure, everybody knowed everybody. Yeah, everybody knowed everybody, practically almost by first name, both White and Black. There was no problem.

Collector: Were there a lot of nicknames back then?

Walker: No. Well, nobody never called me by a nickname. Take my name. They call me Walker and I've been Walker since. I never had no problems. Everybody I knew knew the White persons just like I did the Black ones. See, and we had no problems. I know one thing. I'd rather deal with that old frontier way of dealing than this modern day business, because a man's word was all right then; but a man's word ain't no good now.

Collector: It's pretty expensive with lawyers, too.

Walker: Yeah, I'm telling you the word's no good. Back in the early days you didn't have the trained people, you didn't have a lot of things you got now. Everybody's been hunting for loopholes and lot of people have found them. That is because they got you on paper. But you see, back in that days, you didn't have all that paperwork. You just had a word; you had to have one another's word. That was it. And it ususally stood up, too.

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