

# An Interview with Marion Bennett

An Oral History Conducted by Claytee D. White

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The Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project

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## Preface

Reverend Marion Bennett provides details of the NAACP's historic involvement in the integration of casinos and other businesses, schools, and housing. He was hired as pastor of Zion Methodist Church in 1960 and served in that capacity for 44 years.

Through the years, Reverend Bennett served twice as president of the NAACP and worked with such notables as J. David Hoggard, Lubertha Johnson, and Woodrow Wilson. He recalls the Freedom Fund dinners, the integration of the work force in casinos, and the protests that were held in Las Vegas.

Reverend Bennett was deeply involved in the commitment to integrate blacks into all areas of life in Las Vegas. He lists all those who worked so hard back in the sixties, like Jim Anderson, Charles Keller, Eleanor Walker and many others. He cites the process of integration, which included the Consent Decree against Las Vegas casinos, the Fair Housing Act passed when Paul Laxalt was governor, and creation of the Economic Opportunity Board.

In his closing comments, Reverend Bennett thanks those who fought for freedom and civil rights before him, and admonishes future generations to stay vigilant. He believes in helping other generations as his generation was helped by the ones that came before.

**This is Claytee White. And I'm with Reverend Marion Bennett in his home in Los Angeles -- Las Vegas -- wow, Los Angeles -- in Las Vegas. And it is July 2nd, 2009.**

**So how are you doing today?**

I'm doing great. Good to see you.

**Nice to see you.**

**So tell me when and where you were born.**

I was born in Greenville, South Carolina, May 31st, 1933.

**So you went to school back there?**

I went to -- I graduated Sterling High School in Greenville, South Carolina. Then I graduated from Morris Brown College in Atlanta and from Gammon Theological Seminary also --

**What is the name of the seminary?**

Gammon, now known as ITC, International Theological Seminary.

**And that's also in South Carolina?**

No. It's in Atlanta, Georgia.

**Okay, good. So when did you find yourself and how did you come to Las Vegas?**

Well, I was recruited to become the pastor of Zion Methodist Church at G and Washington Street. During my seminary days I met the area superintendent from Los Angeles up at Drake University one summer and I was working up there in the seminary. And when I completed my work at the seminary, he extended an invitation for me to come to Las Vegas. He did not have a vacancy in Los Angeles, but he told a superintendent who was responsible for this district that he had met me. They offered me the church, so I finally came to Las Vegas in July 7, 1960, to become pastor of the Zion Methodist Church at G and Washington, 911 North G Street.

**And you pastored there for how many years?**

I was there 44 years.

**Forty-four years, wow. How did you get involved with the NAACP?**

Well, I had been involved in South Carolina because in York, South Carolina I had visited as pastor of a church there. I had just gone there in April because I was going to finish seminary in May and they had given me -- I had a student appointment prior to that. So they gave me this church in York, South Carolina. It was primarily for education people, teachers and stuff. Racism

was very terrible. We worked in there and we had to hide the teachers' membership and all that type of stuff. So if they knew they were members, they would be terminated. My dad was kind of active because he would vote even though they would threaten him and all that kind of stuff. So that's how I've been active in NAACP. Then when I went to school --

**So did you hold any offices while you were there?**

No. No. I just was very active. I started in South Carolina. Then when I went to school in Atlanta, I was president of my student body. And we led the protest for the desegregation of Atlanta.

**Which year was that?**

Oh, it had to be in the late 60s because I was still in the seminary.

**Probably late 50s.**

Sixties. Sixties. With the NAACP and all the other young students. And we published that thing. It was in some of these books that appeal for human rights. When we started our protest in Atlanta, it was led by the NAACP and the students from all the colleges and the universities. This was when everyone was talking about Julian Bond and all of those people. So that's how I really got involved in liberation and freedom and things of that sort because that's all we know. I went to Selma, Alabama and all those places with Martin Luther King -- well, A.D. King really -- that was before -- Martin Luther King's brother because he later came to the seminary. We became friends and we started from there.

**So that's how you started in the NAACP.**

NAACP.

**And then you came here.**

I came here.

**And who were some of the first NAACP leaders that you met here in Las Vegas?**

Well, Mr. Hoggard, J. David Hoggard, of course. And there was a guy by the name of Jim Anderson who greatly influenced me.

**So you met J. David Hoggard.**

Yeah, J. David Hoggard. Prior to my coming, every Methodist minister from Stevens on down had always been president of the NAACP for whatever reason. Woodrow Wilson, David

Hoggard, and Lubertha Johnson -- all these people were kind of the nucleus of the people who led the community for desegregation and a better quality of life. And most of them were my parishioners. Dr. Charles West, Woodrow Wilson, Hoggard, Lubertha Johnson, Clarence Ray. And there's this other guy. I see him and I can't call his name. We all immediately just started working. Dr. McMillan, James McMillan and stuff.

**Now, they were already involved when you got here?**

They were already involved.

**So these are people that you're working with.**

Uh-huh.

**Now, tell me who Reverend Stevens is.**

Bill Stevens was a Methodist pastor, the founding pastor -- well, he wasn't the founding. But he built the church at G and Washington Street in 1947. I think he was the first black minister that the black people had. Previously people at Zion would go to First Methodist Church. And they decided -- Ms. Nells -- they wanted a church of their own. So the pastor, whoever he was at First Methodist who was white, would come over in the afternoon and preach to them. Then in 1947 if I'm not mistaken, Bill Stevens was the first black for Zion.

**And is he the one who also did the sit-ins?**

Now, he went back to Boston. I think it might have been. I don't know if it was he or (indiscernible). I'm not sure about that.

**There was a minister early on who used to go downtown to a drugstore and he would just sit there and read his newspaper. They would never serve him, but he would just sit there.**

**You've never heard that?**

No.

**So tell me who was president before you became president?**

I think it was Don Clark. What happened was Dr. McMillan was president. Then he was going through a divorce. So he resigned way back then. And I remember because they wanted Don Kirkland, but they didn't want Don Clark because they felt he wasn't educated sufficiently enough. But at that time the constitution stated that it was automatically the vice president.

**First vice president.**

Yeah.

**That was Donald Clark?**

Donald Clark.

**So he was president and then you became president?**

Yeah. I think in 1963 it was Jim Anderson. I'd only been here -- he came to me to get me to run. And I didn't think that I had been here long enough to know, but he insisted. Now, Jim Anderson was Helen Tolan's former husband. He died. I keep calling her Anderson all the time. Jim Anderson. And he worked full time. He had been a union organizer in Los Angeles. A brother -- you didn't tell him no. He was just totally committed. And so I became president.

**1963.**

I think it was 1963.

**So now, were there one-year terms at that time?**

It was two.

**Okay, already two-year terms. So how many terms did you serve?**

I served three. I served two consecutive. Then when Bob Archie resigned --

**Wait. So you served from '63 to '67. And then who became president?**

I think it was Charles Keller.

**And he was president for several years. And then who was president after that you think?**

I'm not sure. I don't remember. I think it was Eleanor Walker, but I'm not actually sure.

**And then when did you become president again?**

Either '70 or '71, somewhere in there, because that's when I went to legislature. It must be '69 or '70 because I think I went to legislature in '73. We had not built the church as I remember. Back then the NAACP was like a full-time job because of all these complaints in the school system and all the complaints with the housing. So the president every day was going to something. And that's why I didn't run again. I said, well, maybe I'll just run for the legislature. At least I won't have to be -- because I've got to get this church built -- and that takes a lot of effort.

**So how long were you president the second time?**

I filled Bob Archie's unexpired term. It was a year or something, close to two years. I can't remember.

**So what were some of the issues that you remember from your administration?**

Well, of course, at this point in history in Las Vegas we had absolutely -- what shall I say? The only jobs that blacks had were as maids and porters. We had no dealers. We had no waiters or waitresses and what have you. So what we did in 19 -- so we got busy because Mr. Keller, he had a lot of time because he had passed the bar. You probably heard that story. They wouldn't admit him. And Jim Anderson. So we went to work. Then in 1964 we brought Martin Luther King, Jr., out. And that was the big boost financially for us.

**So that was for one of your Freedom Fund dinners.**

Yeah, 1964. Yeah, for the Freedom Fund. It was held at the Convention Center. Then there was like a special financial transfusion as far as the freedom transfusion. And we began to -- the first thing we did was put pressure on Al Bramlet at the union to give us some jobs. And they assessed the hotels for us because we had several protests and all that stuff. And the best thing I think happened was -- we started with dealers and stuff. I mean unemployment. We never had any black waiters. So then we put pressure and they finally hired at the Skillet Room at the Desert Inn. They gave us some black waiters and tried to see if people would come if black people were there. Then we put pressure -- breaking down the barriers in terms of jobs -- and the things that I emphasized were education and jobs. And we spent a ton of money on desegregation, such as bringing in Gene (indiscernible), who at that time was in charge of the NAACP education committee. So we got waiters at least at the Desert Inn. Then the next thing was cocktail waitress. Never had a black cocktail waitress. So they put in one of the real light-skinned girls.

**Was it Dee Dee?**

It wasn't Dee Dee Kahn. It was Cape's girlfriend. I think she has Alzheimer's or something now. She's in Chicago. Real light skinned at the Sahara. So we knew she was black, but I think most people wouldn't know that.

Then we proceeded to -- even what I call OJT, you know, where you go to school so much and you work in the stores. We went from store to store. And the first was Sears and Roebuck. And the guy said I think it's time to let the blacks have opportunities and stuff. So we got that. We didn't even have a cashier or nothing in the store. And Vegas Village -- we shouted when we got box boys just to take out the groceries. You know, way back then that was victory. And Ida



Gaines was -- now, we had a lot of training programs and stuff. And everything that became available, she participated in it. So then they wouldn't hire on the grocery side. That was too much money for blacks I guess. But on the hardware side we got her in there. And those were the types of things that we really focused on. Then, of course, we led the way in terms of equality and education.

**Now, was the EOB behind some of the training funds that came in?**

Well, way back then we didn't have EOB. It was later in '64 or '67 that the EOB came in. It was called something else way back then. Ms. Walback -- white woman from Reno, TD society -- and Lubertha Johnson really were the forerunners of that.

Then after we made all this money off Martin Luther King, Jr., we got a full-time lobbyist in Carson City. We would keep the people informed as to what was going on, and we'd just tell them we need money. And we got money all the time.

We brought down the housing barrier. When Sproul started building all these homes out on Charleston, black people were going out there. And we had a test case, but Barbara and Don Kirkland didn't cooperate because she got scared. We knew she had good credit, so we went over there and they turned her down on the basis that she might get pregnant. And she couldn't even have kids. Barbara's still living, by the way.

But anyway, because of Woodrow Wilson, when Laxalt was governor, then we got the Fair Housing Act. And we had Bob Bailey appointed to the Equal Rights Commission, the chairman of that board.

I can't remember all the times that we brought Mr. Carter the regional director or the NAACP in here to speak at the school board. See, they had a code. And I had a good friend, which was my parishioner, but a real strong man, Mr. H.P. Fitzgerald. And he would always send me -- because he'd get the mail from the thing. They put a little code for black so, you know, not to hide anything. But he would tell me. But he would say don't get me in trouble. And what surprises me -- they never saw the connection. When we'd go before the school board, I'd know all this inside stuff, and he said if I knew who it was I would nail them to the cross, but he could never figure it out. It was so wonderful.

And Mr. Bruner, a white man who was principal of Booker School -- it was Howard

School back then -- he got up and verified what I was saying because Fitz had too many teachers or secretaries at the school at that time. You know how they do. And this guy needed a secretary. And Fitz just told how qualified this woman. He said, oh, I want her, but is she black? Oh, no, can't have her. And you saw egg on their face when I was making them charts. Now, you know he's telling the truth.

And another thing he said, Bennett, I don't want to sway you guys on teaching your kids about your heritage and your history so they're not ashamed of being black and stuff. So we got -- then at the time -- he's now a Ph.D. But you had to agree that you would teach just on the West Side. Then (indiscernible) they can't find black teachers. So we filed suit. You had to go where blacks -- go up there in Mormon university up in Utah and you'll never find any blacks. You go where they're being produced. So they started recruitment and all that stuff. Then we raised so much cane that they brought in -- we wanted a black person that answers only to the superintendent. That was Dr. Claude G. Perkins, who later became superintendent of the school. It's the only black we ever had.

So what I'm most proud of is that we lifted the veil up in terms of quality education and decent housing based on the ability to pay and not on your race and stuff like that. And we were successful in getting the fair housing bill and things of that sort -- equal rights things -- passed in Nevada.

**Wow. That's great.**

**Who were some of the people who served on your executive committees? Any names that you remember other than --**

There was Robert Reed, Charles Keller, and Jim Anderson. I guess everybody's dead. Oh, and Mr. Hoggard.

**Was Sarann on it?**

Sarann was always working with us. Bobby Johnson. I think Earl White also, because I ran against him for president.

**Was Earl White ever president?**

No.

**You told me about the Martin Luther King Freedom Fund dinner. Any other memorable**

**Freedom Fund dinners?**

Yeah. We always had outstanding speakers I think. We had Charles Deeds.

**Now, this was during your presidency?**

Uh-huh. We brought Deeds in. Oh, and Jimmy Gay.

**Now, was Jimmy Gay the chair of your Freedom Fund dinner?**

No. Bob Bailey was the chair for Martin Luther King. When we brought Dr. Jackson from the National Baptist (indiscernible), it was Jimmy Gay. And we had Shirley Chisholm.

**As one of your speakers?**

Uh-huh.

**Wow. Fantastic.**

That's way before she ran for president.

**Right. How did you stay in touch with the regional office and the national office?**

Well, we had a good relationship with Ms. Pittman. I don't know if you ever heard of her or not.

**I think so.**

Yeah. I guess we just always called on and used the resources of the thing. And back then there was the legal education fund. I guess it was just a close --

**So Pittman was in the regional office?**

She was regional up in San Francisco.

**Did you have to send certain records to her on a regular basis?**

Huh-uh. We just called on her. She'd come up here and speak, and also see if we needed the resources. And the last one that I worked with -- it wasn't Ms. Simmons, but Mr. Carter. See, we used them. They came up here a lot.

**So the only reports that you sent, then, were all sent to national?**

Uh-huh. I don't ever remember sending anything to --

**Regional office.**

I know one time after -- I don't know if it was Martin Luther King's banquet or some big fundraiser we had. Some of my adversaries called over to the regional office and said that I had left town with all the money, something. Anyway, he sent an investigator. Then Leonard Carter said, hell, y'all got better records. And I was blessed, though. Now, if they had come in after

Ms. Stella Fields quit -- she was a worker like you. That woman worked full time. If we voted to pay two dollars, she wrote it down. If they broke to go to the bathroom -- and for free. I had never seen anything like her. That was one of the women that her no-good grandson didn't even come over there because he probably don't appreciate her like I did. And she later worked for me up at the church. But any rate, he came and he said, Bennett, that woman -- y'all have better records than we have at the national office. She was just gifted at that. And she didn't work. I've never seen anything like that. Every record. Everything.

**That's great. Do you remember any of the national conventions?**

Yeah. I went to quite a few of them. I should remember them. I went to the ones in Chicago, Kansas City, and Detroit.

**So now, the local branch did not have an office at the time?**

Huh-uh.

**So tell me how presidents operated.**

Well, it's fine. I mean I just operated just like I'm doing now. I just kept all the materials at my house. At that time we met at a different church. And the (indiscernible) that I made those people aware of. Then also make some of them attend the meetings and stuff that normally wouldn't come. So we worked on that. It's always been up until we got this office.

After we got a consent decree against these hotels about discrimination and all this stuff, they gave us the initial seed money, 75,000. That's when we got Jesse Scott to come up here. He's the first paid director we ever had.

And everybody just assumed that -- I mean just like it was a natural. You kept up the books and the materials and stuff. In fact, we accomplished a lot more before we had an office in terms of outreaching and trying to help people as opposed to just setting up a big office somewhere. And that was the first thing. And how we kept the office going, all the people had benefited from our efforts like (indiscernible/Elliott) and all these people that had these big jobs at the Test Site and all that, we just had to teach one of them to give us a thousand dollars. We asked certain people like Woodrow, Perkins, and all those high-powered people, and they contributed. That's how we kept the office up. We didn't beg the white folks for nothing.

**So did you have any active white people on your board?**

Oh, yeah, the board. At one time they were the bread and butter. Ms. Brookman. Flora Dungan. That building was named out there for her. Oh, she was -- Lord have mercy. Oh, yeah, we had some beautiful white people. Eileen Brookman was a wealthy Jewish woman. She died a few years back. And Flora Dungan unfortunately had cancer and died. Oh, yeah, we had a lot of white people. Boy, they worked harder than the blacks. Yeah, we had some beautiful white people. I mean people who represented something trying to get stuff back. Harry Leavy. The whole world has just changed. Think about all those - just like the national you have all of them - Jews and white people that kept that thing going.

**That's right.**

A lot of people just won't show. What I call showcase. Everything in the showcase and nothing in the warehouse.

**So Charles Keller became president after you the first time. After the second time when you went to the Assembly, who became president at that time? Was that Jesse Scott? No.**

No, it wasn't Jesse Scott. I don't know if it was that boy -- have you talked to Eleanor Walker?

**No. I have a call in to her. She's the only person -- well, there are two people I can't get in touch with. At least I have Eleanor's telephone number. But for Donald Clark, we have a telephone number with only six digits. So we have a wrong phone number.**

He may talk to you; he may not. You've heard about him. He's my friend. But I know he's contagious. He lives right around here. Because when they call him about other things, he just -- I say, Clark, why don't you --

**So are you still active today in the branch?**

Well, I haven't been going to the meetings because I told Frank the reason being that's my auction day, which means -- you see all this junk? I go to the auction. I said that's where you make money. I said that's my workday. I go wherever. Now, I could have gone this last time. One day a month I go to this auction. And that's where I buy the supplies I have around the house and all this stuff. And that's the way I survive. And he knows that. In fact, I got that big file cabinet out there belongs to him. It's fireproof and he said he needed one. And it's so heavy. Whenever he gets an office. I mean I supported Frank and I think he'll be good.

**Oh, yes. Any other NAACP memories you'd like to share?**

Well, I knew it was -- I mean everything's been -- it was really the highlight in my day in Las Vegas because NAACP was the most respected organization. And even other white people would say we have to respect you even though we don't approve and stuff like this. See, another thing was that Cassius Clay and boxing would be here. And another -- yeah. And we could intimidate these people because it's a tourist town. They didn't want this adverse publicity and all this stuff.

And another thing we had -- it's simple as getting black counselors in the schools. Now, I saw a letter that Chester Stewart wrote me -- I was looking for something -- telling me. And I bought into it. All of us at the NAACP did; that they didn't have any blacks qualified to be counselors in the school. And we thought then -- I always let anybody who wanted to use Zion Methodist to use it. We had a young group -- I saw that boy at a funeral the other day, speckled face -- and they said I tell you one thing I didn't get no education, but they were youngsters and they started cutting up. The casinos called because the occupancy rate at the Tropicana had fallen because of all this disturbance, picketing and stuff.

**So where were you picketing?**

They were at the Tropicana hotel, these youngsters. Then they started cutting up in the schools. It was like a revolt. The Mormons told the school board you better find some black counselors in these schools. Would you believe overnight they were already working with master's degrees, but it was below their capacity -- Charlotte Cook and Janet Crawford and another woman, Elsie Simmons, several of these people. Most all of them dead. Overnight. I'm just saying how we old people thought the white people were telling the truth. And they started all this stuff.

**So what kind of protests did they have at the Tropicana and why --**

Well, the kids were just protesting, picketing. Then what we tried to do at one time -- Mack kind of sabotaged that -- I don't know if it was Floyd Patterson or "Sugar" Ray Robinson or Sonny Liston. We were having this big fight at the Convention Center. See, we had planned and organized this march, all these placards, see, because we knew national TV was going to be -- it would be all over the nation, a free thing. But at that particular time Mack kind of sabotaged it and made a deal with Hank Greenspun.

**That's right. That he sent the letter to the mayor. 1960.**

I don't remember. And they just started and all that back then because there was no news. It was

all in the newspapers. And apparently -- what's that news service picked that up? And people stopped coming here. Just like when there was the riot in Detroit, who would want to go where there's a riot? I know I wouldn't go. So the arguments he raised fell down because of the disturbance, see. And that's when they gave us that money because -- in fact, they started -- and they took West Side, but they started downtown. And that was frightening. The guy that owned Palm Mortuary said we've got to do something because of our wives out here in these penthouses. They don't want that, particularly when it comes to -- that's how Nevada Partners got big -- because of the revolt.

**So Nevada Partners was probably after Rodney King.**

Here in Las Vegas, yeah. I don't remember what year it was. So then all these hotels, all of them, pitched in and bought that land.

**So was that in the 90s?**

It had to be. The last time we had a rally here.

**So after the Rodney King riot?**

Uh-huh. Now, they backed away after everything got quiet. For years, Ramadan and all of them, they were paying those people. They were putting the money in there. People were leaving the thing to train blacks because they don't want their town closed.

**Now, that training you're talking about, was that through EOB?**

(Indiscernible.) Basically what we did at EOB was Head Start, housing, and medical. I guess way back they did training for dealers and porters and like that. But they were more focused on just receiving the money for Head Start.

**Because wasn't there a person named Johnson? What was his name?**

Leo Johnson. Yeah, that's right. Reverend Leo Johnson. Now, he had some type of training program.

**Wasn't that part of EOB?**

Yeah. He worked for EOB. It was just like CEP and all that stuff was the forerunner of EOB.

**Yes. Right.**

Employment training at that time was a part of EOB. Yeah, Leo Johnson.

**Now, the two last questions I want to ask are questions that Frank Hawkins wants to make**

**sure that everybody answers. What would you say to our ancestors if you could, if you could talk to our ancestors today?**

My point is that we are most appreciative of their commitment and dedication and their lives have not been in vain. We have a responsibility to continue to help the less fortunate ones. See, I came up in the south. It didn't matter whose child you were or what denomination you were. If you were black they gave -- that's how I got through college and seminary. I went to an AME school. I had never been to AME. But it's just that they -- and the philosophy being, of course, that each one help one. We help you up and you help some other blacks up. That's why I can't say no to trying to help people today because that was instilled in me. You have an obligation and a responsibility not just to protect yourself but to pull somebody else up. I would thank them for a lesson well taught.

**Great. So what message would you send to future generations?**

That the struggle is not over. It's a lifetime commitment, a lifetime responsibility. It's the same thing. It's just in a different form today. It's a shame that people think, particularly with Obama being president, that everything is over. It's just like in the past. They'll put in a black president of a hotel. And all the maids and the porters are somebody else other than black. The mass is still at the top in worse shape because we don't think we need to struggle. People don't think they need to support the NAACP now. Well, everything is done. It's hidden. It's just like a snake in the grass whereas in the south you knew your place. But in the west and New York you never knew. They don't tell you. But you get passed over when you apply for jobs and stuff, certain jobs. And you've been equal with them, oh, Lord.

As far as this campus they think a lot of that (indiscernible) at the university is because he brought all those blacks in there. They're not staying there. I tell you they got more blacks at this university than they have at University of Georgia. And you know Georgia, we have more blacks than any other state in the nation. I think my son told me they've only got three or four black professors -- can you believe that? -- at the University of Georgia. When I hear it I just -- I never met the man. I had an opportunity to. But I didn't know that --

**The dean of the law school.**

The dean of the law school. The dean of education. I know he resigned. There's a black woman



in charge of development. Our problem is here -- are we nine percent of population?

**Probably nine or maybe ten, but right around there.**

Uh-huh. And I said Lord have mercy. That man brought all those blacks in there. And, see, the previous president Nixon or whatever his name is --

**No. Carol Harter was president.**

Yeah. But before Harter.

**Before Carol Harter it was --**

Nixon. The guy who fired Tarkanian and we were protesting.

**Okay. What was his name?**

I want to say Nixon or Mittson.

**Oh, wow. It just won't come to me.**

But he went to Long Beach.

**That's right.**

Not even one black had made tenure under all his years, not even tenure according to the information because I got the information. Not even tenured, saying nothing about -- not one.

Now, you know -- oh, Lord have mercy. Then this man come in -- well, I don't know about this lady. I never met her. But I was with the people fighting this guy that went to Long Beach. But we had some good times out there.

**Well, good. Well, this is what I wanted to ask. So thank you so much.**

Well, it's a pleasure.