

BLACKS SHARE LAS VEGAS HISTORY ON 75th BIRTHDAY

by Roosevelt Fitzgerald

Although scant there are evidences of the presence of Blacks in early Las Vegas. Recording the history of a place is generally difficult even under the best of circumstances. Historians, historical archaeologists and others depend, to a large extent, on whatever artifacts which can be found. In relationship to the historical research of the ancients, we have had to depend upon relics left behind by each of those civilizations. The same is true of Las Vegas. The early records of Las Vegas have generally been White oriented. Little was done to record or preserve the presence of Blacks in the Las Vegas Valley. The



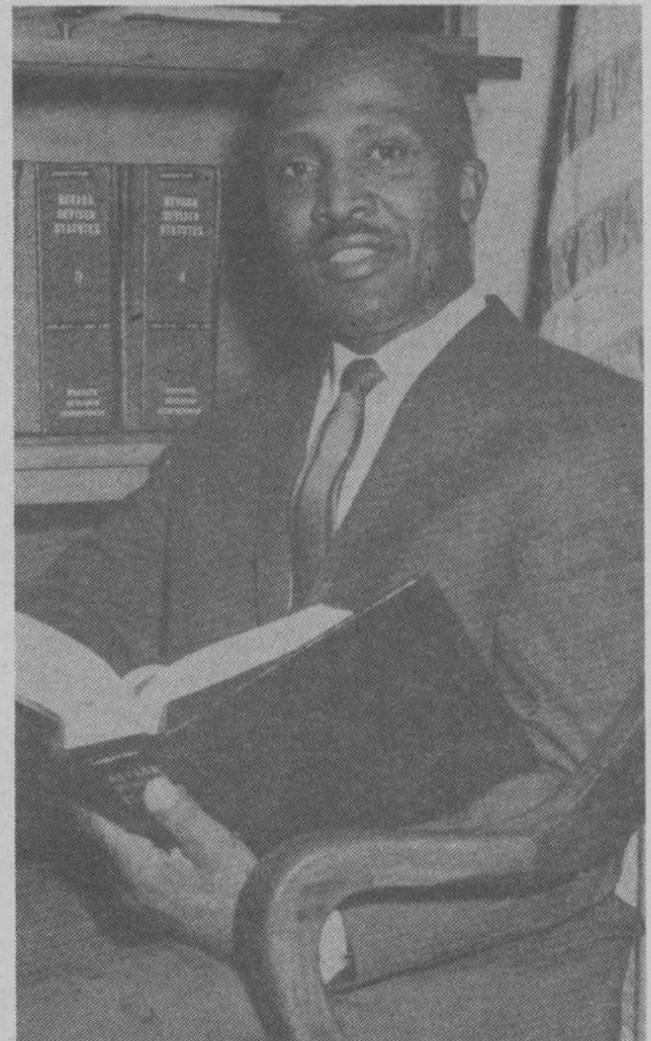
John Howell, a black man. Also living at this ranch was his brother William. Las Vegas had remained basically a rest area for those traveling the Old Spanish Trail. The climate was such that few wished to remain here. Because of the springs it was only a good place to visit. Most settlement in the state had taken place in the northern portion. Finally, near the turn of the cen-

lay track in other places; a few remained among the maintenance crew. There were "Colored, Chinese, Mexican, Greek, Austrian and other foreigners" reported in the Las Vegas Age Newspaper. These men, like others who arrived here in 1905, lived in tents or whatever other makeshift shelters they could devise. None of the early inhabitants had time to be involved in such things as racial discrimination. They were much too busy merely surviving. By 1909 there were indications of the development of racial intolerance. The agent for the land company, Walter Bracken, was fearful of "colored people and other foreigners" scattering all through the town. He felt that these groups were part of the "undesirable classes" and, as a result, should be permitted to live only on Block 17 which was adjacent to the "Red Light District" of Block 16. This was the first overt step toward segregation in Las Vegas. The remainder of the town remained open. These "undirables" could frequent any saloon, cafe or other business establishment in the community. Their place of

residence was all which was restricted. Blacks did live in other places but not within the confines of the town. There was the Mitchell ranch and the Washington ranch. The first was located near the present day "Strip" and the latter was between what is now Sunset Road and the old Los Angeles Highway.

In 1916 the first church for colored people was established by Rev. J.L. Collins. Segregated housing was joined, at that point, with a segregated place of worship. Three years later yet another aspect entered this alliance against Blacks. The Union Pacific Shop Federation, in 1919, stipulated that "none but white men be promoted as we feel that it is not fair for us to be compelled to work with them in the shops." While this statement was geared toward alien Asians it is interesting that rather than stating that "none but white men" would be. This implied that at whatever juncture the Federation saw fit all other groups could also be excluded since it only included white men.

The 1920's brought the advent of KKK activity. (See Blacks, page 19)



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local newspapers took few pictures which included Blacks and the stories which appeared had little to say about the subject.

It is important, now that we are beginning the Diamond Jubilee Celebrations, that acknowledgements are made paying tribute to their contributions.

As early as the mid 1870's there were Blacks in the valley. At the time when there were but two active ranches here one was partially owned by

tury the San Pedro, Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railroad began to push southward. Because of the presence of the springs and the availability of wood from the nearby mountains it was decided that Las Vegas would be one of the sites where a station would be built. The railroad arrived in 1905; thus Las Vegas, as a corporate town, was born.

There were Blacks among the crew which brought the railroad to Las Vegas. Most went on to

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