

# Blacks of Las Vegas

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There were Klan parades on Fremont Street and the local white citizenry was encouraged to join its league. Luckily, the racial climate here was not conducive to their objectives. The number of Blacks residing in Las Vegas during that time was less than fifty and posed no economic threat to anyone. As the 1920's came to a close, economic conditions deteriorated. The Stock Market had plunged the Nation into the depression and most people were out of work.



FITZGERALD

At approximately that same time an appropriation was made to defray the cost of constructing the Boulder Dam. People from all over the country came in search of employment. During the course of its construction several thousands were hired. It took the combined efforts of the newly formed NAACP under the leadership of Arthur McCants and the Colored Citizens Labor and Protective Association to alter this. The first Blacks were finally hired in July of 1932 almost two years after the initial hirings. For the next four years of its construction only a total of 44 Blacks worked on the project. It has been estimated, with the rapid turnover of workers, that more than 40,000 men were employed, although there was seldom more than 5,000 working at any given time.

Following the completion of the dam, Las Vegas experienced numerous changes. A tourist industry began to develop. With it a more rigid policy of segregation was initiated. Blacks were removed from the downtown area and gradually forced into the McWilliams Townsite, the original site of Las Vegas, which ultimately became the "Westside." The new

hotels established a "NO NEGROES ALLOWED" policy. Movie theatres had areas where Blacks could sit and they were not permitted to swim in the pools of the newly opened motor courts. The plight of Black entertainers was no less. They were permitted to perform, but they must enter and leave by the back door. Pearl Bailey, Lena Horne, Nat King Cole, The Will Mastin Trio and others were subjected to that treatment. They were not afforded accommodations at the hotels and as a result they had to reside in private homes on the Westside when and if they were available.

As the 1940's arrived Las Vegas witnessed even more changes. Military bases were constructed and Basic Magnesium in Henderson, Nevada opened for business. The first large scale migration of Blacks to Las Vegas was begun. When these newcomers arrived they found little or no housing. They lived in tents without any facilities. Life was extremely difficult for them. Black soldiers were not welcomed in the USO Club. A Black USO Club was opened for "them" on the "Westside." Black workers at BMI lived in overcrowded, segregated housing at Carver Park in Henderson. Banking and other lending institutions were not making money available for Blacks for housing. There was no one to turn to. The authorities did not protect the rights of Black citizens, and the influence of the underworld was such that any Black person who dared attempt to alter the condition was "made an offer which could not be refused."

The Moulin Rouge hotel opened midway through the 1950's. Its purpose was to afford a "nice" place for Blacks. Its licensing was initially challenged, but finally approved. Entertainers, Black and White, were regulars. It became an interracial establishment. Headliners from the other hotels frequented it and along with them came the never-ending line of "hangers on." Business at other hotels suffered tremendously. The word went out to White entertainers that they were expected to linger around the casinos and thereby encourage the "suckers" to spend more money. The death-knell for the

Moulin Rouge had been sounded.

As the 1950's came to a close, so too did the tradition of segregation. The local chapter of the NAACP along with other interested and concerned citizens, both Black and White, applied pressure to the local resorts. A march was threatened for the morning of March 26, 1960. News people from all over the country were here. None of the major hotels wanted that kind of image of Las Vegas to be a highlight of the evening National News. They realized that people would not be willing to travel great distances just to see yet another demonstration. They could remain home and see such free of charge in their own communities. Las Vegas, the "adult Disneyland," was an escape from the harsh brutalities of the remainder of the country. A year following the opening of the Convention Center, twenty-one years ago, the walls of segregation came tumbling down. The task required the efforts of numerous citizens who have a clear definition of what American Democracy is all about. Among them were: Woodrow Wilson, Ms. Lubertha Johnson, Rev. Prentiss Walker, Dr. James MacMillan, Bob Bailey, Jimmy Gay, Mayor Oran Gragson, Governor Grant Sawyer, Hank Greenspan and other too numerous to list. Twenty-one years ago a Black person could not rent a room, gamble, eat, or have a cup of coffee in any business establishment either on Fremont St. or the Strip. It is because of the efforts of those who were here and who were involved that those conditions changed.

In the past twenty years numerous other changes have occurred in regards to Black people in Las Vegas. The changes have been slow in coming but they are taking place. However, there are yet major problems. Twenty years ago the few Black teachers to be found in Las Vegas were primarily in the schools on the Westside; there were no Black dealers, waitresses or waiters, no Blacks in front of the house operations within the tourist industry, no open housing, no Blacks in political offices, few Blacks in police work, no Black firemen until 1958.

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Doolittle Center, Lake Mead & "J" Sts.  
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BETHANY BAPTIST CHURCH	PENECOSTAL CHURCH OF GOD IN CHRIST	VEGAS VIEW CHURCH OF GOD IN CHRIST
ALLEN CHAPEL AME CHURCH	JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES	ST CHRISTOPHER CATHOLIC CHURCH
LARRY'S SIGHT & SOUND	GREATER NEW JERUSALEM BAPTIST CHURCH	PILGRIM REST MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH
MUHAMMAD MOSQUE OF ISLAM	CHRIST HOLY SANTIFIED CHURCH	SECOND BAPTIST CHURCH