

Community Pride Destroyed Because Of City Neglect

By Roosevelt Fitzgerald



Professor Fitzgerald is director of ethnic studies at University of Nevada-Las Vegas

animals, were also present in large numbers. The presence of those animals made for unsanitary conditions. Flies were a nuisance and, quite probably, combined with other elements in bringing on the outbreak of scarlet fever in December of 1909. Obviously, something had to be done. Laws were passed, though not consistently enforced, governing responsibilities for animals. Efforts to clean up Las Vegas were undertaken. In those

stigma of living there. Because its founder had attempted to ride in on the coat tails of the railroad it was dully punished by railroad officials. No services were provided. As the remainder of the community developed, the Westside remained stagnant. The area of Las Vegas where Blacks and other minorities resided was adjacent to the "red light" district. That area did not receive the kinds of returns on its tax \$\$\$ because everything was as did others. It was a happening too fast.

clean section of town. Blacks knew well how to clean. They had worked as maids and porters and handy men. They had extensive experience in cleaning and tidying. The influx of Blacks in early 1940 overtaxed the capacity of the Westside. Little housing was provided. Conditions worsened, but authorities were reluctant about making improvements. They were convinced that Blacks who came here with BMI or the military would be returning to the south as soon as the war ended. What had been a bad situation became intolerable.

While other areas of town were making improvements — sidewalks, street lights sanitation and others — the condition of the Westside deepened. At Carver Park a like circumstance developed. That was the area which housed some

For both the Westside and Carver Park, it became increasingly easy for some to believe that it was the presence of the inhabitants which brought on the deteriorating conditions. None of the ap-propriated monies were earmarked for the Westside. In other parts of the city there were regular garbage collection days. City codes were also enforced. Dilapidated buildings, abandoned cars, burned out and boarded-up structures had to be repaired or removed. Such was not the case with the Westside. Absentee landlords were reaping the benefits of their captives and were not encouraged nor forced to make even the most basic im-

As the city became more famous, more tourists visited. The city fathers, desirous of making Las Vegas more beautiful, created agencies designed to accomplish that end. The Las Vegas Beautification Committee was return on the tax dollar

it receives less than two percent financial support from the coffers of the city and the county. Yet, there are some who cannot also be brought to the attention of those who are currently in city government and who supposedly represent the area. It is quite easy for representatives to say what they

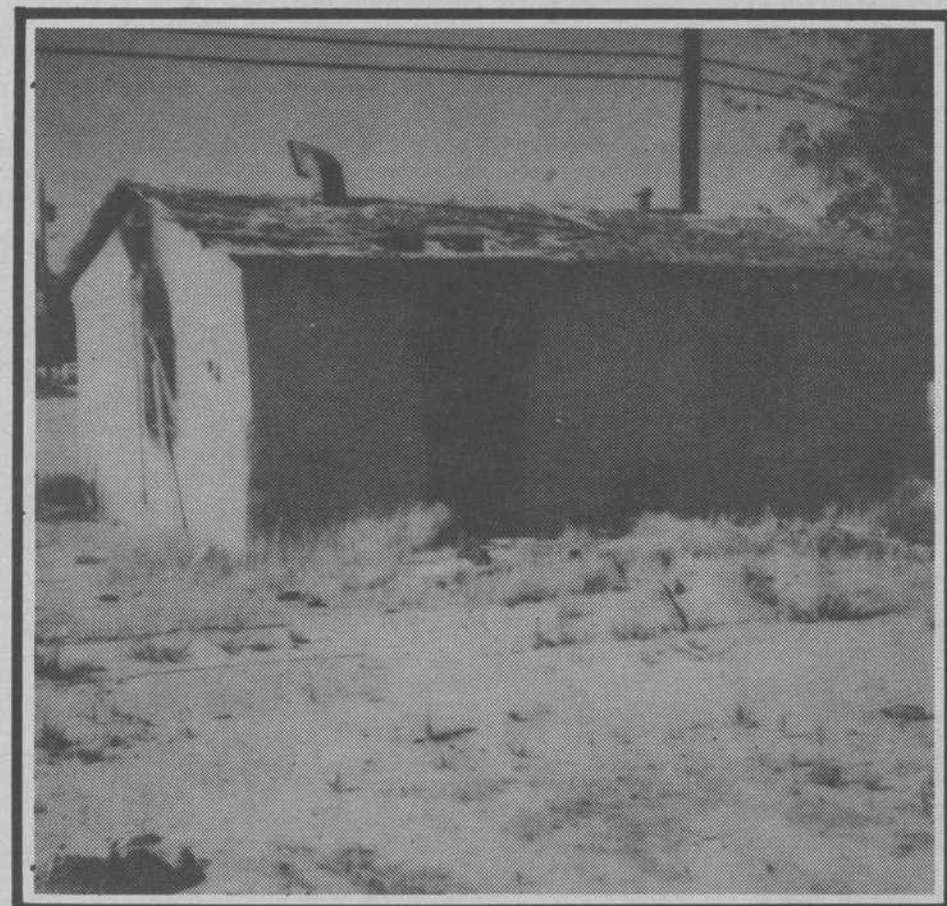
Of all the methods archaeologists utilize in determining how people have lived over the centuries, the least glamorous is analyzing the garbage dumps of the ancients. However, it is quite often the most rewarding. Quite a lot can be discovered about a person or a group of people simply by examining those items they discard. Since the beginning of the presence of life forms on this planet, there has been waste. Secretions, eliminations or cast-offs — all become part of the garbage.

Las Vegas came into existence just seventy-five years ago. The area which was first surveyed for the site of the city was called the McWilliams Townsite. The name was later changed to the "Westside." J.T. McWilliams, the founder had hoped that it would become the hub of activity in southern Nevada. A few buildings were erected and provisions were made for the future growth and development of the area. Everything was dependent upon the arrival of the railroad. However, upon its arrival, it established its own town and called it the Clark Townsite. The latter became the official town of Las Vegas.

Because things had not occurred as McWilliams had anticipated, his town heard its death knell. Overnight it became a ghost town. The few buildings there somehow mysteriously caught fire and practically everything was destroyed. It was impossible to fight the

flames because the water pressure to the area was not great enough and the only real significant supply was to be found in the few wells which had been drilled there. That fire occurred on the evening of June 6, 1905, less than a month after the great Las Vegas auction of May 16. Clark Townsite became the place where lots were bought and sold. The railroad furnished whatever conveniences there were to its own area. Nothing was provided for the Westside. Clark lots were much more attractive to buyers because of those improvements. The Westside became increasingly less attractive because of the lack of the same. Instead, it became an area inhabited by those who could ill afford to purchase lots in Las Vegas. As with any new town, sanitation was a problem. There was a sewage system and most other basic necessities were in short supply. The early inhabitants were tent dwellers and their refuse was deposited at whatever handy available places. There were no garbage collections. Each person was left to their own devices in determining a means of ridding themselves of their throwaways.

Las Vegas was a jumping off point for supplies destined for surrounding mining camps. There was limited access to those camps. Wagons drawn by teams of mules traveled between Las Vegas and outlying areas. Then, as today, the animals dropped their leavings in the paths they traveled. Miners, with pack



areas where the town leaders resided, cleanup activities were common. The regularity of such diminished in direct proportion to the wealth, worth and esteem of residents of different areas.

During those early years, Black residents lived in the downtown area between Stewart and Ogden and First and Fifth Streets. Everywhere else was off limits to them, with the exception of the Westside or outlying areas. The Westside was not a Black area. Actually, until the 1940s, very few Blacks lived in that area.

The Westside was commonly referred to as "Ragtown." One who lived there suffered the

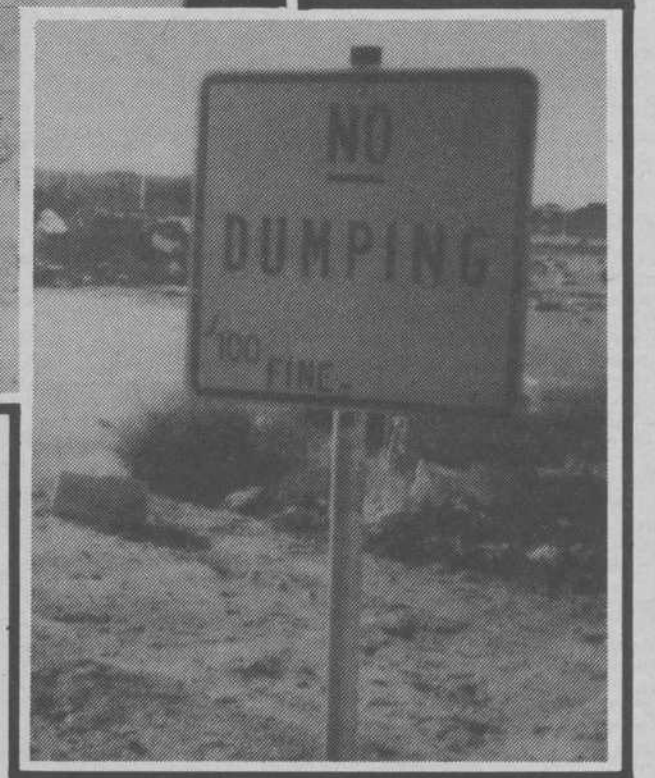
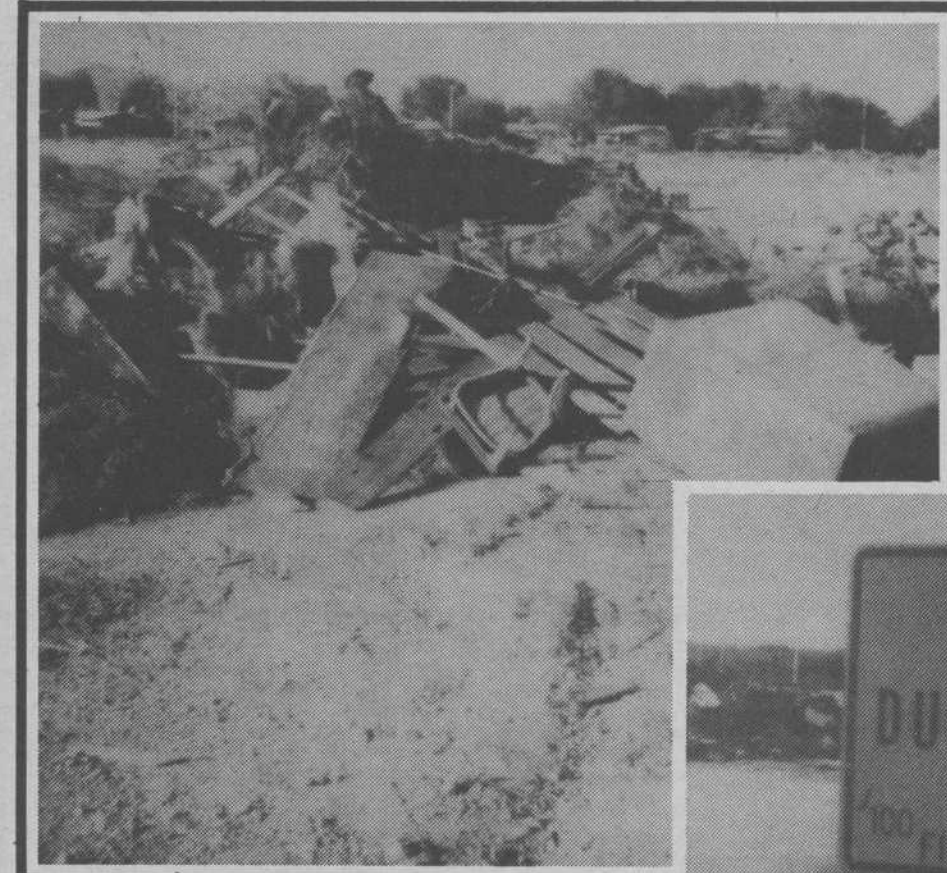
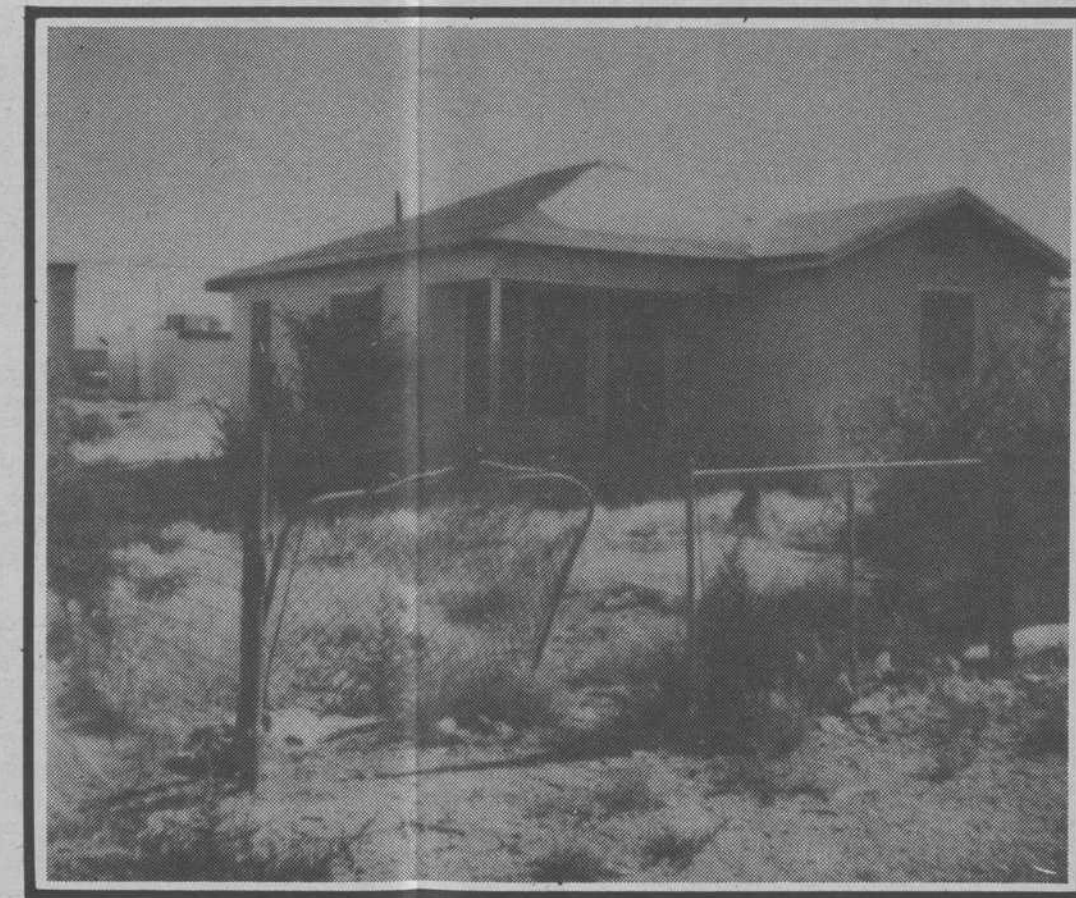
necessary evil and was conveniently ignored by the "respectful" citizens of Las Vegas — except those who made a profit from it.

By the beginning of the 1940s, Blacks were systematically removed from the downtown area. They were relegated to the Westside. Their arrival did not affect, in a positive manner, the treatment that that area had received for the previous thirty-five years. If anything, it worsened. The place had been treated like a step child and now its inhabitants, and now its inhabitants, who were looked down upon, served only to aggravate the condition. In 1937, just as the Dam was being completed,

things began to return to normal for Las Vegas. There had been a great influx of newcomers seeking employment and the daily hustle and bustle of that construction period had caused the city to literally burst at its seams. There had been little time for cleaning up because everything was happening too fast.

A "clean up" drive was initiated by the Mayor. Blacks, who lived in the downtown area, made use of city trucks in removing trash. The activity was necessary, not only because it was needed, but also because the town wished to become more attractive to the expected hordes of tourists. The Las Vegas Age reported on their efforts quite complementary. It was said that black Las Vegas were the only ones helping to beautify the city. It went on to suggest that "the rest of the town should take a lesson from our Colored folks," and that the "property of our colored neighbors" should be used as an example of a

organized. Its charge was to beautify the city and valley. The Westside make recommendations reflected that reality. In which would insure such. spite of the fact that the Monies were provided for planting shrubbery and nine percent of the total for providing other ac-



are performing the tasks which governmental entities should be doing. The condition of Black community was not created by any dalliance on the part of its citizens but by the dereliction of duty of the dodos who dawdled in office while the deepening disposition of the Westside continued to decline and decay to the dismay and disgust of all but the demagogues.

The responsibility of beautification should and ought to be, mutually shared. While the citizens

are going to do after an election. It is a totally different matter to see what they have done to date. So many are so eager to say "my record speaks for itself." That is a safe statement to make. No indication has been offered as to whether what it speaks to is positive or negative. Let us look at the record. Let us decide if we like the sounds it makes when it is played for the "turned in" ear.

Let each of us do what we can and demand that others, whoever they are, do the same.