

# the BLACK TOURIST

*... Who is he, what is he, what is he looking for?*

*By Roosevelt Fitzgerald*

An eminent scholar has written that there is a hierarchy of basic human needs. Among those are such things as food, shelter, self-esteem, companionship and self-actualization. Practically everyone would agree that there is a definite need for food. I say practically because, from time to time, there are some who see fit to fast and abstain from food. In those rare instances, for that period of time, there is no need for food. By the same token, there is a need for shelter — from the elements. In some places shelter is required to a greater degree than others but, it is shelter nonetheless. No matter what the culture or civilization, there are standards. Among those is the need to feel positive about oneself. Colloquially, it is stated that "if people want others to think well or respect them, then they must think well of and respect themselves." The small fortunes which most of us spend in order to bring about cosmetic changes is done to make ourselves more attractive to others. We need to have people, in general, like us. There is a greater need for that small intimate inner circle, whom we call our loved ones, to be ever in our collective corners. Last on the list is self-actualization.

Self-actualization comes in many forms. Whatever shape it is in it cannot be realistically attained until those others would have been met. It comes during and as a result of leisure time. It

might result in a painting, a poem, a piece of prose or music, jogging, playing tennis or simply meditating. These vary dependent upon whether those activities are being done as a means of support or simply enjoyment. A generally thought of leisure activity which is done for some kind of remuneration becomes merely a job. Whenever there is pressure to be successful, leisure is diminished. There is a need for simply enjoyment oriented activities — things which are done for no purpose other than entertainment or creativity.

Enjoyment can be had anywhere. The ultimate can only be had in Las Vegas. No place in the world can rival Las Vegas for purely uninterrupted entertainment. It can be had on both spectator and participant levels by anyone who has the time, disposition, inclination and wherewithal to do so. It was not always that way.

A hundred years ago, where Las Vegas sits today, there could be found sand and sagebrush. The people who lived here were derogatorily referred to as "digger Indians" because food was so scarce that they were forced to dig for roots and whatever else they could find. In 1905, when the town was started, auctioneers and others predicted that one day "Las Vegas would be a prominent and prosperous city." Such optimism was hard to

swallow in light of the fact that the only things which could be discerned from where they stood were a few tents — one with hot beer, meandering burros and shimmering heat waves on the horizon.

Between 1905 and 1930, the town did grow though not at the rate in which it had been predicted. It started out as a frontier boom town where one might find prospectors, miners, land speculators and railroaders, loggers and



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

builders. There were Blacks among them — not many but, they were there. The early residents considered themselves pioneers and the pioneer spirit has persisted.

The first quarter century was fairly free of racial incidents. The smallest of numbers of racial minorities might have been the cause. Perhaps there were not enough of them to be a threat. It might have been more than that because during that same period of time, an early attempt to organize a chapter of the KKK met with rebuff

from the "mayor, the constable, the fire chief and several other local citizens." The perpetrators were chased out of town. Later, however, during the early 1920s, there were Klan parades on Fremont Street but the activity never amounted to too much. Around the country bigots were paying \$10.00 in order that they might hate someone. In Las Vegas, there were not enough minorities, including Jews, Catholics, Italians

and Greeks, to insure one day that they would get their money's worth.

There were a number of saloons in early Las Vegas. All were located in the infamous "Block 16." These saloons were open to everyone. Segregation in public accommodations was not practiced in early Las Vegas.

In 1933, during the construction of the Boulder Dam, gambling was legalized in Nevada. The erection of the Eighth Wonder of the World was already attracting visitors to the city. By the time the

dam was completed, during the middle of the "Depression" years, a quarter million tourists, per year, were visiting southern Nevada. The climate, the beauty of the desert and the excitement of gambling in saloons with true western motifs, immediately caused Las Vegas to take on an air of distinction. It maintained its wild west atmosphere. Honky tonk music, five card stud, ladies of the evening, roulette, on occasion a faro game, outlaws (the mob), and speeding 1937 chevys turning corners on two wheels were not unusual.

By 1940, the racial climate had begun to change for the worse. Before, Blacks could enter any establishment in Las Vegas as patrons. They could order whatever they wanted and they paid for what they got just as everyone else. It was "a pig in a poke" and one just hoped for the best. The outcome had nothing to do with race. Pearl Bailey recalls arriving in Las Vegas in 1941 and that she "played the machines" in some of the establishments. She also recalls that "a few years later 'people of race' were barred" from those same places. For a decade and a half, Blacks could not be found in entertainment establishments as patrons, only as maids and janitors or porters. Josephine Baker, during the early 1950s, insisted that there be Blacks in the audience while she did her performances. Some of those "domestics" were hustled off, properly gar-

bed and seated at a nice table right up front, dead center. Racial policies in Las Vegas were obviously different from those found in other parts of the country. It almost seems that proprietors sought to anticipate the attitudes of their customers. It is possible that an error was made.

By 1955, Sammy Davis and the Will Mastin Trio were given accommodations at the New Frontier. Prior to that time, even Black entertainers could not secure lodgings in any of the hotels of Las Vegas during that fifteen year period. They were expected to secure quarters in "private Negro homes on the Westside." In 1955, also, the Moulin Rouge, the first "integrated" hotel opened. That event was well received by the public and favorably reported on by the local press. Five years later, in 1960, segregation in the entertainment industry, following a threat of demonstration by the local NAACP, ended. There was no violence in its wake. The power structure simply agreed to end it. Room bookings did not diminish. Tourists arriving in April of that year would not have believed that just a month before, a black person could not purchase a cup of coffee in downtown Las Vegas or on the Strip.

The history of segregation in Las Vegas' hotel industry was very brief. The founders of the industry, through short sightedness, sought to develop a resort which (See Roosevelt, Page 12)



**PLANNING BLACK TOURISM STUDY** — A national survey of what black Americans think about vacationing at Las Vegas is almost ready to start. Analyzing the design of the \$29,500 project at Las Vegas Convention Center are — from left — Convention Authority member Roy Woofert; J. Robert Harris II, president of JRH Marketing Services, Inc. of New York, which will carry out the study, and Rossi Ralenkotter, authority marketing research manager.