

How the 'West Side' Came Into Existence

By Roosevelt Fitzgerald

The McWilliams Townsite, as it was originally surveyed, was not an extremely large area. It extended from what is now called "A" Street on the east to "H" Street on the west. Bonanza Road was the southern boundary and present day Washington St. was the northern. These were not, initially, the names of those streets.

In 1905, Bonanza Road was known as Clark Street, McWilliams was called Gass and Morgan was Stewart Street on the south was the northernmost edge of the townsite. "A" Street was called First Street, "B" was Second Street, "C", "D", "E", "F", and "G" Streets were Third, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh. Where "H" Street is today, could be found the westernmost boundary. Clark, or Bonanza Road, was the southernmost boundary. There was nothing beyond those boundaries other than the Helen J. Stewart ranch to the northeast and the Mormon Fort directly to the east — both less than a mile away. When the McWilliams Townsite started, there were no Adams, Madison, Jackson and other streets. What eventually became the westside, consisted of a mere twenty-eight blocks of territory. Quite small.

In 1940, when Black Las Vegans were exiled to the westside, it had not been involved in any real development. The few structures there had not been well constructed or maintained. As whites moved out, blacks moved in. They found an already deteriorating condition waiting to greet them. The less than 200 who went there, hardly found enough available housing. When BMI opened for operations, it was accompanied by an influx of newcomers. Their arrival only

heightened the already deplorable conditions blacks were being forced to live in.

Blacks from Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi and other places, found themselves in dire straits. The recollections of some of those who arrived here then gives us some appreciation of the manner in which Blacks were treated in Las Vegas during the early 1940s.

Ms. Sarah Ann Knight Preddy, who arrived here in 1942, recalls that there were very few houses on the westside — a dozen or so. For most of the people, there were only tents or whatever other kind of ramshackle shelters they could construct. Some slept on the outside or in their cars. Others remember the large number of people who built platforms in order to elevate themselves off the ground and they would place tarps across them. Sometimes, during the hotter months, they would wet the tarps in order to gain a bit of respite from the heat. Few of these efforts really helped the situation.

The living conditions were so terrible that a large number of people simply sought to stay away from their living quarters. Not only was the heat unbearable, but they also had to deal with the lack of sanitary facilities. No one had an inside toilet or running water. There were common faucets from which water was gotten and brought and stored in galvanized buckets. Large number three tubs were in great demand for bathing and clothes washing. Clothes lines were strung from one place to another. While there was hardly a worry that someone would take what did not belong to them, there were still risks, of a different sort, involved.

After a hard day on the job at BMI, an enterprising person might return home and begin to take care of those basic necessities like cooking and cleaning. A fire would be built, outside of the tent, both for safety and comfort sake. After preparing a meal and having dinner, water would be heated up and dirty clothing would be put in for an overnight soak. Early the next morning they would be washed and rinsed and strung up before going to work. Often, as we all know, after such effort, nature might take a turn for the worse. It was not unusual for a "wind" to come up all of a sudden. The dripping clothing would be like a magnet in trapping particles of dust and dirt. Within a matter of minutes, what had been sparkling, clean clothes, would have become

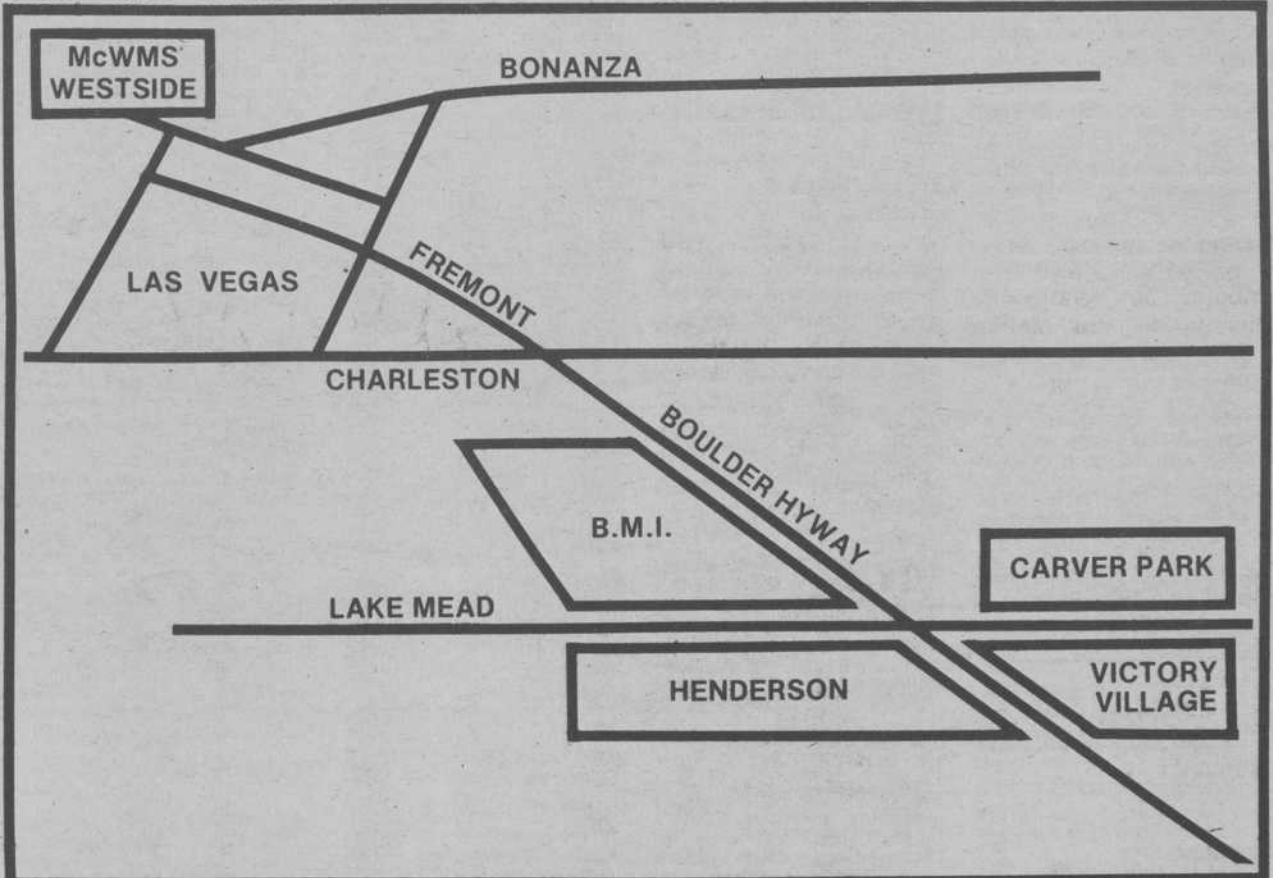
but the local leaders were threatened by the coming of a new town. They were certain that its presence would hurt Las Vegas economically and politically. One of the major supporters of the opposition was Senator Berkeley Bunker. However, the promise of work greatly dampened their objections. That condition is quite common. Even today, we have a similar condition which exists in which the local people are being placed between a rock and a hard place. Most people fear the possibility of a nuclear war and that Nevada might very well be a primary target of incoming Russian missiles if the MX System is constructed within the state. However, the possibility of jobs, relief from inflation and economic development, places that fear in a



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but also an area for trailer homes. Black workers, both families and single men, were restricted to Carver Park. Their facilities were not sufficient nor were there ample lodgings provided for black workers. The structures were constructed on concrete block with inside drywall. The cooling system consisted of shared swamp coolers and, for winter's cold, gas heaters were used.

recognizable difference. Blacks found waiting for them in Clark County, circumstances similar to those they left behind in the southern states. The wrappings were different, but the contents were the same. The process of ghettoization has led to what is called a black subculture. The misconception of poverty and privation as being components of Black culture is a national perception and it is



merely hanging mud pies with different shapes. The person, upon their return, would simply take them down, shake them out and rinse them out again.

Their problems were not restricted simply to the westside. Some housing was provided at the job site in Henderson for the workers. The McNeil Construction Company had initiated the construction of 1000 homes on February 2, 1942. The construction project employed a large number of Las Vegans who had previously opposed the building of Henderson. They had known that the new plant would employ a large number of workers

secondary position. The choices are starving to death, being bombed to death or working. There is no room for debate. The need for work will automatically win out today just as it did in 1941.

There were three primary areas constructed to house the workers at BMI. One was the new town of Henderson which was primarily a settlement of single family housing. The latter two consisted of Victory Village and Carver Park. Victory Village was the site of dormitories to house white workers. It was quite large. It included not only the more permanent type dwellings

Because of the housing and other restrictions imposed on blacks as they arrived in Clark County, clusters of transplanted southern black lifestyles developed. Only the geography had been changed for them. Practically everything else remained the same. The sameness has prompted some to believe that the lifestyles which seem to follow blacks around are pathological phenomena. They fail to recognize or acknowledge that rather than being a cultural characteristic, the manifestation is merely a result of being forced into situations in which there can be no

nationally erroneous.

There were positive changes which blacks experienced upon their arrival. Those changes did not have much to do with their quality of life but, rather, with additional involvement opportunities they had not had in the South. For the first time, for most of them, they found themselves in a position where they could exercise the vote. Most had lived in places where, through numerous devices, they had been denied that basic American right. Because the number of blacks in Nevada had previously been so small and because the state had (See Westside page 15)