

# How the 'West Side' Came Into Existence

## PART III

By Roosevelt Fitzgerald

All that is necessary to grow is space and nourishment. In 1905, Las Vegas had all of the space it needed and, little by little, it got the nourishment. The railroad company and others instituted a promotion of the town which was unprecedented in the twentieth century. They

predicted that one day, Las Vegas would be the crown jewel of the United States.

McWilliams Townsite also had all of the space it needed. It, however, experienced lean times due to neglect. "Ragtown." That's what it was called. No nourishment, development or care. It was

punishment — not because of anything it did — because it's founder had had the audacity to try to get one up on the railroad company. By surveying the site he had hoped that the city would be located there and, thereby, insure him a place in the annals of the history of Las Vegas &, incidentally, make a few bucks to boot. The money people never forgot nor forgave his impertinence.

For the next thirty-five years there was little activity in the area of the McWilliams Townsite (westside). Most of the people who lived there were either Euro or Mexican Americans. Blacks, remember, lived in the downtown area between Stewart and Ogden and First and Fifth Streets. Such remained the case until the 1940s.

The twenty-eight block area which was originally the townsite

had begun to expand — geographically. Lots were selling for \$150.00 or less. That amount was much less than half the cost of comparable lots in Las Vegas proper. The cause of the difference is simple. Las Vegas lots either had or had access to improvements. The westside lots did not. The limited number of people living there were scattered throughout the area. There were no sidewalks, water plugs, sewage or streetlights. Even more so than now, there were large vacant areas of desert within the community. When locals referred to westsiders during the early history of Las Vegas, they were not talking about black people.

The early residents of the westside did not want Blacks living in the area. They were able, initially, to enforce their desires. It was possible, partially, because of the restrictive clause which



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Walter Bracken had built into the allocation of lots of 1909. Though the provision did not directly apply to the westside, it became, in effect, a kind of unwritten law which all concerned abided by. Beginning in 1939, when Las Vegas no longer wished to have blacks in the downtown area, westsiders began to find less support from them in preventing blacks migrating to the westside. As a matter of fact it was Las Vegas' idea to shift the black population to the westside. Westside residents sought to thwart such activity by protesting the establishment of a commercial district on the westside. Blacks, who had formerly owned small businesses in the downtown area, had been told that their business licenses would not be renewed unless they removed themselves from downtown and to the westside.

Blacks, in effect, were being forced from one area and experiencing barriers in their attempts to enter another. Perhaps some Las Vegas were of a mind that Black Las Vegas would simply disappear. A petition, filed with the City Clerk on October 4, 1939, which had been submitted and endorsed by the NAACP, prevented Blacks from being excluded from the westside. Downtown business interests were so anxious to be rid of Blacks, that they were not about to permit the few white westsiders, who protested their coming, to hinder their efforts to make the "great white way" of Las Vegas white in more ways than one.

As more Blacks arrived and became part of the workforce at BMI, additional strains were placed on the limited housing available for black people. Because banks and other lending institutions were not making funds available to them for housing, they were forced to do without. The authorities

had been aware of the housing needs for the influx of workers, both blacks and whites. A decade earlier, during the construction of the Boulder Dam, housing had been made available by the construction of Boulder City. Major General Ralph Cousins, of the Army Air Corp., had been involved in securing and/or erecting housing for workers. Because the construction of BMI was in the national interest, it, along with housing, had been given priorities which were rapidly diminishing in the public sector with the increasing demands on production being made by the war in Europe.


Originally, 2200 priorities had been issued for housing for the BMI project. By 1943, there were yet 700 priorities remaining unused. By that time, most of the white workers had secured housing either at the job site or in Las Vegas. It is reported that local contractors had no interest in the remaining priorities — perhaps it was because they would probably be occupied by Blacks.

Even while that housing was not being erected, white westsiders were still waging their own private war against blacks who had moved into the area. Wortishek's Lumber Yard was selling 2X4's for \$29.00 per thousand and 1x8's for \$33.50 per thousand. Blacks were forced to erect their own structures. Their efforts resulted in the creation of numerous simple cabins without any of the basic facilities or necessities. The builders were neither Frank Lloyd Wrights nor Del Webbs. The finished products were not generally something to write home about. Most of their structures were simple and temporary.


Frank Goheen, spokesman for white westsiders, contacted

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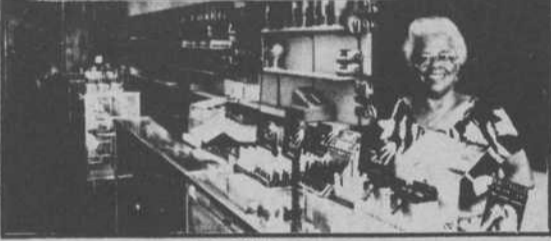


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