

# How the 'West Side' Came Into Existence

PART V

By Roosevelt Fitzgerald

When one is used to having nothing, even very little might seem like a lot. Such was the case with several million of Black Americans as the first half of the twentieth century began to wind down.

Prior to 1940, over 90 percent of the total Black population of the United States lived within a 500 mile radius of Atlanta, Georgia. Most were involved in agricultural pursuits as tenant farmers or sharecroppers. There were a few who worked for wages and some who were land owners. The latter two groups were few and far between. Their futures, in more ways than not, were at the whims of white southerners. Obviously, those futures were dim.

Beginning at the turn of the century, with the large scale immigration of Europeans, Blacks found themselves being replaced in the job markets both in urban areas and in the South. That condition remained until the outbreak of World War I interrupted the almost constant flow of European immigrants to America. For a brief period of time, Blacks were given some respite from their economic sufferings. The social sufferings prevailed. There still remained those instances of violence against Blacks which the authorities were either active participants or to which they turned blind eyes.

The Niagara Movement, which led to the establishment of the NAACP, did attempt to curb those invasions of rights of Black people. It met with limited success. America was not yet ready to live up to its principles of the democratic ideal for all its citizens.

Between 1914 and 1916, numerous events transpired which negatively affected

Blacks. That was especially true of the South. Other places were not far behind. There was a severe labor depression which put them out of work and that was closely followed by an invasion of boll weevils which practically devastated cotton crops. For the duration of the

ning of World War I brought some jobs. Southerners, who were reluctant to let their workers go, took steps to prevent their leaving. In 1917, there were 38 lynchings & that number grew to 58 by the following year. Intimidation became part and parcel of the techniques of forcing Blacks to remain in the South. The depression, for Blacks, was already in force. Their presence was necessary because, at that point, the mechanical cotton pickers, which were capable of doing the work of 200 laborers had not been developed.

As those events were occurring, nationwide, there were less than three dozen Blacks in Las Vegas. They were not experiencing those kinds of difficulties. The really meaningful

there was nothing better for certain people to do. Still, they were kept in their place.

Conditions at the BMI facility were brutal. Not only was there the extremely hot climatic conditions which southern Nevada is noted for, but there was also the intense heat of the processing within the plant. The workers were subjected to those hardships. No one expected it to be easy — work was so sought after and scarce, at the time of the opening of BMI, that there were probably few openings for shoveling coal in hell. Blacks had to contend with those conditions and more.

We know that there were problems with housing and other basic necessities. Partially because of the minimal housing provided at the job site, Blacks were for-



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years, did not even have an equal opportunity at "sinning."

While the self concept of Blacks were being diminished, simply because of the way they looked, those of others were receiving a shot in the arm. Members of "Murder Inc." could come and go as they saw fit. Rarely were they accosted by "the law." Blacks, however, were arrested for almost

anything which could even remotely be interpreted as an infraction of either written laws or traditions or prejudices. It was similar to what happens with teenagers nowadays — sent to "juvi" for being unmanageable, untidy, or unanything. The following is a list of a few of the different sort of things which Blacks were arrested for during the 1940s. Wayne Fant was arrested because of a fight which ensued following his asking a white gentleman for a handout. The latter pushed him and a fight started. Only Fant was arrested. "Seven Negro gamblers, charged with operating and playing in a dice game not licensed by the city." That was a headline. It is too bad that those places licensed by the city, at that time, were all off limits to Blacks. An environment for committing those kinds of crimes were created by the system. In today's terminology, that might be considered entrapment. Annabelle Buford was fined

See WEST page 23



blight, Blacks were literally without incomes. They were forced to eke out a living as best as they could. No help for them, was forthcoming from the government or anyone else. There was relief for white landowners. The floods of that period so totally inundated the lowlands of the deltas, that it was impossible to put in a crop. Blacks began to migrate to the cities of the South and North.

Upon arriving at those places (Birmingham, Mobile, Atlanta, New Orleans, Charleston, Jackson, Memphis, Baton Rouge and others) they found inadequate housing, poor jobs and limited educational opportunities. The begin-

harassment of Blacks in Las Vegas would not begin for another 25 years — 1940 or thereabouts. However, following the end of World War I, during the era of prosperity of the 1920s, there was limited Klan activity but it met with very little success. In Las Vegas, Blacks could at least walk the streets without feeling that they were in "enemy" territory — but not for long.

As Black southerners arrived here to work at the BMI plant, conditions were rapidly changing for the worse. They were, however, better than conditions they had experienced "back home" — they found work and they were not being lynched whenever

ced to travel back and forth from Las Vegas — twenty miles — twice per day. The road from Las Vegas to BMI was just that — a road. Dust, wind and heat along with bumper to bumper traffic. White workers who travelled the route had places to stop off and have a "cold one" to cool themselves off. Blacks could not do such. The "red light" district, which was moving toward the Boulder Highway, operated with an open door policy for whites and/or mobsters. The doors were slammed tightly shut in the faces of those Blacks with a little time on their hands, cash in their jeans and lust in their hearts. Blacks, during those

