

WESTSIDE FOCAL POINT

By Roosevelt Fitzgerald

People fight for difference reasons — real or contrived. They fight because they think they've been wronged or they fight to wrong someone. Seldom are fights waged to right a wrong. Even during the days when knighthood was in flower, the damsel in distress was not really the cause of the heroics displayed by the knight in shining armor. Ego, macho or the simple need to kill somebody, was the real reason.

In the history of the world, the majority of conflicts have been small scale operations. Most of them were one on one — control of the tallest tree, a cave, food or such as that. They grew to conflicts between clans and other clans, families and friends against other families and friends and it grew and grew. It grew to such proportions that the combatants rarely knew what they were fighting for. The first stage, on that level, those who cause or declared hostilities were present on the battleground. There was fame in the event. The kings and emperors of the ancient world and those who became kings and emperors, rode off to battle and they rode back in glory.

Warfare evolved to the point where those who declared it remained far out of harm's way. Someone else did the fighting. It was passionless and without malice. It was a job. The "warriors" were paid until they were killed and their beneficiaries fought over the insurance.

The more sophisticated wars have become, the less personality they seem to have. World War II was no different — on the battlefield, that is. There, in the hedge row country or at Bataan, the grenades, bombs and bullets did not discriminate. A burst from an automatic machine gun ripped through all comers without any passovers. In those places where soldiers practiced and rehearsed their craft, there were differences.

Las Vegas was such a place.

Because of its ideal climate, sparse population, maximum ownership of land by the Federal Government, terrain and qualities of isolatedness, Nevada was ideally suited for military bases. There were several in close proximity to Las Vegas.

The presence of the bases influenced the population figures of Las

were stationed in and around Las Vegas, came from all parts of the country. Wherever they came from, they had at least one experience in common — exposure to prejudice and discrimination. A quarter-century before, their fathers had gone off to fight the war to make the world safe for democracy — World War I. As children, they had heard all of the stories of

war years, was a segregated community. Its segregation extended into the activities of the soldiers stationed in the area. Black soldiers were excluded from the gaming establishments and hotels of downtown Las Vegas. Whenever they received overnight passes or weekend leaves, they could only frequent Black clubs on the westside. Because of the stress placed on

provide a home away from home atmosphere for the soldiers. It did not always measure up. In mid December of 1942, Miss Dorothy Speace made telling remarks at a luncheon given in her honor as a representative of the National Red Cross. She prefaced her remarks by telling how "remiss the Las Vegas women had been in their treatment of soldiers stationed

ceremony. It was a welcome event for the soldiers. There was only one problem — Black soldiers were not allowed to enter even though USO clubs were financed by the American people through the National War Fund. The oversight was soon brought to the attention of the authorities who, two months later, made plans for opening a USO



DR. MARY McLEOD BETHUNE, (standing, center) as did most black women, did all that she could do to make things pleasant for the black soldiers in their small and often inadequate segregated USO Clubs.

Vegas. There were both Black and white military men stationed in the area. The latter had carte blanche access to everything while the Black troopers were restricted in their movements. On base, they lived in segregated quarters and manned segregated outfits. The segregation barriers in the military would not be toppled until 1948 with the issuance of Executive Order 9981 by President Harry Truman.

Black soldiers, who

discrimination which awaited those men on their return to the States. They, however, would be less receptive of such treatment.

More so than employment opportunities, serving in the military was important to Black people. In their minds, one who was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for the country could not possibly be denied full citizenship. So much for miscalculations.

Las Vegas, during the

housing on the westside by workers at the BMI plant, there was little or no facilities available for them. They were forced to rely on being "put up" by Black residents. Had they been permitted to enter, there were hotel accommodations available. Democracy, however, had not grown up enough to provide its defenders a place to sleep.

Las Vegas, like other towns near military bases around the country, was expected to

here. That they had this reputation all over the country and that soldiers who left for Las Vegas went with the pity of all of their friends and acquaintances." Miss Space spoke of the treatment of white soldiers. We can imagine what the treatment of Black soldiers must have been. But, we won't.

Just two months earlier, a USO residence club had been dedicated. Bishop Gorman, of the Nevada diocese, officiated at the

club for "colored" soldiers.

The second club was initially located in a converted house. To add insult to injury, the local press reported the opening in very disparaging terms. "If you can imagine a Hollywood plutocrat's library, a Harlem jive joint and a bar-b-que stand, then you'll have some idea of the appearance of the westside USO club." Cute.

Though the facilities