

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

By *Roosevelt Fitzgerald*

There's more to Thanksgiving than a but-
terball turkey!

Seventy-five years ago, the few Blacks living in Las Vegas celebrated Thanksgiving Day. There was not a great deal to do here nor were there many places to go out for Thanksgiving dinner. The one or two black families here had a relatively quiet day. There was the religious worship but it was carried on in their homes. Black people, in 1905, were not permitted to enter the few places of worship here. They were segregated houses of God.

The few Black men who were section hands with the railroad, took their meals in one of the few restaurants in the area. There was no segregation in the small cafes here at that time. While their spiritual needs were not being tended to, at least they were thankful for the food.

Approximately sixty-five years ago, the Black population had grown to about fifty. Rev. J.L. Collins was planning to organize "the Zion Rest Mission of the M.E. Church for the benefit of the colored people of Las Vegas." The Mission only had fourteen members when it was started. It did have officers. Mrs. L.H. Irving served as class leader and the services were conducted in private homes.

Because of the segregationist patterns existing in Las Vegas, it became necessary for those fifty Blacks to become more and more tightly knit. A strong sense of unity developed because they realize that what happened to one of them, happened to them all.

The second decade of the Twentieth century was characterized by what historians referred to as the era of prosperity — a time which had been brought on by World War I. There were numerous new jobs in the factories and in the building trades. Most Americans were earning dollars and, during that time, a dollar was worth a dollar. They

could afford luxuries that they had not had before — handymen, maids, gardeners, and such. Those were the only kinds of jobs which Black Americans were able to get. They were not much but — they were something. Prosperity filters from the top down and at each descending level, the extent of prosperity is less. Blacks were able,

might have been. Quite often, Black children were directed away from the classes which would teach them certain skills such as typing, bookkeeping or drafting. No one was hiring blacks to do those jobs anyway so "why worry about taking them." For what they learned, however, they were indeed thankful.

Black parents continued at their tasks and tried to put aside a little for a rainy day. They did

organizations, Black Las Vegans were definitely thankful.

The Lindy Hop, shorter dresses — halfway between the ankles and the knees, the Big Apple and the flicks were popular. People were swimming at Lorenzi Park and the Mermaid Pool. Black Las Vegans were dancing at the Mitchell Ranch but they were not swimming at the park. Why? Pools were off limits to Black people. It's a good thing

and deprivation seeps up. The positions held by Blacks, were the first to be chopped. They were forced to give up their "penny ante" jobs because no one could afford the luxury of maids and porters any longer. By the time, the unemployment figure reached 10 million, just about every Black person, in America, was down and out. Nothing to be thankful for but, what the heck.

The Boulder Dam

figure could easily have been zero had it not been for the combined efforts of Black Las Vegans. Their unity showed that progress, however small, can be made through cooperation. They did not have much to be thankful for but, for that which they got, all on their own, they were thankful.

By the time the 1940s got underway, Blacks could not buy a cup of coffee in downtown Las Vegas. However, they were making a decent wage working at Basic Magnesium. They had few houses, no sanitation and they lived, for the most part, in tents and shacks. They either walked knee deep in dust or knee deep in mud. At night they travelled in darkness and during the cold nights in the desert during the winter months, they kept warm with kerosene stoves. Doing without is always a hard pill to swallow but they did. Over the years, the numerous deprivations that they suffered, made them stronger. Their individual strength made their strength, as a group, even greater. They would need that strength later and when that time came, they were thankful that they had it.

Then the 50s rolled around. Uneventful, on the one hand and not so on the other. The fifteen year period of total segregation came to somewhat of a halt with the opening of the Moulin Rouge Hotel in 1955. Five years later, the walls of segregation crumbled because of a threatened march, on the Strip, by the NAACP. That was followed by the beginning of new jobs and new ideas about civil rights. A concentrated drive was launched toward attainment of such things as open housing, equal employment, better education and a more enhanced quality of life.

The 1960s witnessed the manifestation of the strength of black people. There was nothing to lose so, why not risk it. They made their voices heard in Carson City by sending their own representative in the person of Woodrow

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at least, to put food on the table and a roof over their heads — not much of a roof but a roof just the same. For this, they were most thankful.

As Las Vegas entered its third decade, other changes occurred. There were more people, of course, and quite a large number of them were children. Fortunately, the schools were not segregated. Children attended the Fifth Street School and the old Las Vegas High School. Blacks, Asians, Mexican and white children sat in the same classrooms. They learned what was taught. Their expectations were not as great as they

not earn much, so they were lucky that rainy days were few and far between. They got a scare, during that time, which brought back terrible memories of years gone by — the KKK rose its ugly head in Las Vegas and, for a short time, conducted a membership drive. Some few citizens joined, but most would have no part of it. The numbers of Blacks living here did not make it worth the \$10 membership fees. Blacks posed no threat and most of the local citizenry were doing ok. Considering the lack of legal protection Blacks had from those kinds of terrorist

that swimming was not a necessity — unless the 120 degree summer heat was a bother but, then, Blacks were supposed to take the heat better than white people — weren't they? Also, by not being permitted to enter the pool, the chances of Black children drowning were at a minimum. At least they had that to be thankful for. Right?

The fourth decade of Las Vegas' existence brought hard times and good times — back to back. The depression officially started. It had been underway for Blacks since the end of the Civil War in 1865, but no one else had noticed. Prosperity filters down

project saved Las Vegas. It brought new jobs. It also brought a classic example of the fact that Blacks are the first fired and the last hired. They had to fight for two years before they were given an opportunity to work on the dam. Even then, out of the several thousand workers hired during the duration of the dam project, only a total of 44 Blacks were hired. They had to fight for two years before they were given an opportunity to work on the dam. Even then, out of the several thousand workers hired during the duration of the dam project, only a total of 44 Blacks were hired. That