

No Bed Of Roses

TRUE MEANING OF XMAS- WHEN?

By Roosevelt Fitzgerald

Why speak of the true meaning of Christmas, when there are presents to be opened? I thought so. We'll wait for a week and try it out combined with New Year's Day.

Take it from me, the 1940s were not very long ago. The circumstances which existed, nationwide, for Black people served to point out the dire straits in which they found themselves. Some, however, were yet not convinced of the severity of their condition. As they became more aware of the absence of even simple necessities, they began to re-evaluate their realities.

There were numerous services not provided Black citizens of the westside. The first three blocks, beginning at Bonanza and going north, were primarily inhabited by white residents and that was the furthestmost limits of the areas of bus services to the area. Black people, who used public transportation, were required to walk from their homes to the distant bus stops. The busses ran irregularly and, even so, some drivers, seeing Black patrons scurrying to get to the bus stop, would wait until they were almost there and then pull away and leave them standing in a cloud of dust and heat.

Black residents also were deprived of postal service. There was no delivery for them. Black people were required to go to the downtown Post Office to receive mail. Quite often, on their way home from school, Black students would tend to the family's postal needs. Whenever there were parcels to be shipped, those same children would be required to leave school, pass the Post Office, go all the way to their homes on the westside, gather their bundles and return to the Post Office before it would close.

Las Vegas was still a small town in the 1940s and there were few schools. Every child walked to school. Black children were required to walk even though they lived quite a longer distance from the

schools than did white children. Transportation was not provided by the school district but it did allow each family 35 cents per day to defray the cost of bringing children to school. While the intentions were



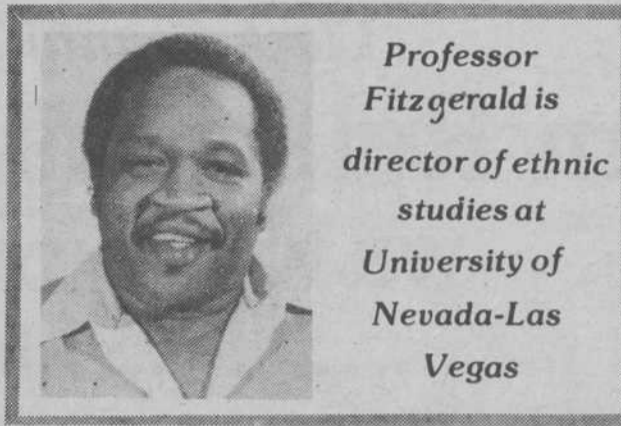
good, the idea was not always feasible since most parents either did not have a vehicle of their own or had to be on the job before school would open and not be off work at the end of the school day. 9:00-4:30 p.m., which was the school day, was sandwiched right in between the normal working hours of most.

White children, generally, were able to walk to school at all grade levels. For Black children, the walking time was anywhere between an hour and an hour and a half, while that of most white children was closer to fifteen or twenty minutes. With the exception of the westside, schools ranging from kindergarden to twelfth grade could be found. They were neighborhood schools only for those who lived in the neighborhood. The concept of the neighborhood school obviously had different meanings for Black and whites. For the latter, it was a matter of convenience and for the former, it was a matter of segregation.

The embarrassments did not end with those inconveniences. There

was much more to it and it carried over into other areas as well. Black children, because of the distance they lived from the high school and also because of the smallness of their numbers, were not involved in the usual extra-curricular activities. They sat in the same classrooms but they were actually outsiders. Because the restaurants were all segregated, they were not able to participate in the graduation breakfast activities and, except in unusual cases, they were not invited to the parties which were one of the few sources of fun and entertainment for teenagers. As a time when most teenagers complained of not having suitable recreational outlets, Black teenagers had even less.

Conditions might have been worse — if they could have been. The city finally gave Blacks a break but it was for the wrong reason. They wanted to build a municipal swimming pool. The pool would be constructed through the use of public funds and thereby, legally, would be available for the public's use. Black Las Vegans comprised part of the public. Unlike the hotels and casinos or Lorenzi and Mermaid pools, preventing Blacks access to the pool would not have been within the realm of the private sector. The question which arose was probably on the order of "how do we keep 'them' out of our pool?" Their solution had some similarity to the major characteristic of the Plessy vs. Ferguson Supreme Court case of 1896 — "separate but equal." Two municipal swimming pools were constructed. One of those was located on the westside. The completion date for the westside pool was to precede the completion date of the other pool by more than a month. It did not mean a hardship for non-westsiders because there were other swimming facilities available to them. The purpose of the early completion date was to allow Black residents time to become accustomed to swimming near their



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residences, thereby creating a set of unconscious psychological circumstances in which they would not wish to swim in the "other" municipal pool. It worked.

The swimming pool catered to a large number of people for numerous reasons. Primarily, it was the presence of extraordinary heat and the absence of air conditioners. Small table fans did not do the job. For 25 cents a child could enter the pool and remain there all day and

for just 25 cents more, so could an adult. The turnstiles turned a total of 1574 times the first week.

Through subterfuge, the system had Black people as unwitting collaborators. Perseverance was the key and tenacity the password for Blacks in Las Vegas during the 1940s. Blacks were bandied about by the backward thinking babbies who, with their baleful balderdash, sought to bury their responsibilities to the Black community in

buckets filled to the brim with blarney and benign neglect.

Black children, who were beginning school in 1948, were graduating by 1960 or thereabouts. Chances are some of their children will be graduating this school year. I wonder if they ever talk about similarities or differences that those two generations have in common?

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