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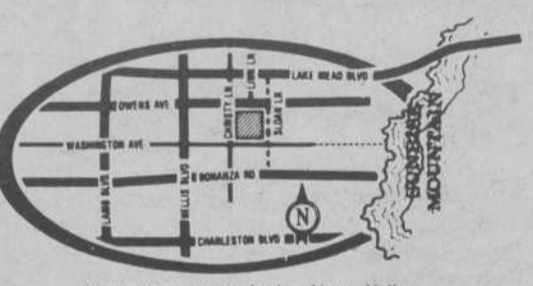
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Grant Sawyer

Somewhere in Virginia, an underground coal mine has been burning for well over a decade. It is no secret. There is apprehension but, life goes on in the mining communities which are housed above ground throughout the countryside. You might say that the people of those hamlets are sitting on top of a "powder keg". Scientists have warned that the constant burning is slowly building up the carbon dioxide levels. Only so much pressure can be withstood. Soon the level of gases will cause a powerful explosion. The people of those communities are confronted with a challenge. So far they have not generated the proper response.

I suppose that if there is any moral at all to this story, it would have to be that "if there is no way for pressure to be vented, it will blow the top right off—a la Mount St. Helens."

For a much longer time than ten years, a different kind of pressure was building up in race relations in the United States. For all of those years since 1865, and before, there had been few instances in which that pressure was permitted to vent itself. On those rare times when it did, only a handful of Black people experienced relief. The masses were "kept in their places." The rumblings of the devastating effects of that pent-up pressure was beginning to be heard during the 1950s. The "valve keepers" of America ignored what they heard and blamed it, as others had done for the thirty preceding years, on the Communists. Can you imagine communists encouraging people to fight for democracy? I cannot.

I don't know why anyone was surprised. Maybe I should rephrase that and say that I was surprised that so many were surprised. I am certain that if others had been forced to live under the kinds of conditions which Black people had been relegated to, they would have revolted much sooner.

Unlike other places in the nation where the pressures had been building up for more than a century, Las Vegas' pressure cooker condition had been in existence for a mere 2 decades. Remember, prior to 1940, the condition of Black people in Las Vegas had been relatively acceptable. Their numbers had been small and, even though the housing had been restricted to a small area between Stewart and Ogden Streets, they had had the run of the town. They were able to frequent any and all business establishments. Once the dam was completed and Basic Magnesium opened for operations, the racial climate took a turn for the worse.

Almost overnight, Black Las Vegas were ushered from the downtown area and they were forbidden, though not by



Al Bramlet

END OF AN ERA

law, to enter any of the restaurants, hotels or other social/entertainment businesses in the town. Jim Crowism was born and there was not a thing that they could do about it.

Black newcomers from Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas and other points South, did not notice any difference between here or where they had migrated from. It was fairly easy to segregate them. During the two decades between 1940 and 1960, the Black population of Las Vegas increased from less than one hundred to close to ten thousand. The total population of Clark County, in 1960, was less than seventy thousand. We can see that a sizeable percentage of the resident population was segregated and that they were also Black.

The turmoil of the 1950s finally seriously arrived in Las Vegas in late 1959 and early 1960. The local chapter of the NAACP began to move toward confrontation politics.

All was not bleak. Swifts bacon was selling for 45 2/3 per pound and flour was 39 2/3 per five pound bag. A pound of Maxwell House only cost 55 2/3. A large number of Black entertainers were appearing in Las Vegas. Nat King Cole, Duke Ellington, Billy Eckstein, Sammy Davis, Jr., Dakota Staton and the Treniers were but a few.

In the movie theaters, audiences were watching "Odds Against Tomorrow", "Porgy and Bess", "Island In the Sun" and TV audiences were enjoying Tightrope, Perry Mason, The Real McCoys and on Saturday nights they felt a little melancholy when Red Skelton would sign off with a gentle "...and may God bless ..."

"Colored" people were probably given an omen of things to come when the state Budget Director, in seeking to cut down costs, ordered all colored phones to be replaced by the more economical black phones. A "Black"

mentality was also replacing the "colored" mentality of the past for "Negroes"

Meanwhile, back in the jungle, a Jewish Synagogue in the Noting Hill Section of London was smeared with swastikas and Jewish men removed their Talliths. Perry Edwards

you— those two mass murderers and perhaps even the people who would deface a Synagogue could rent a room, buy a cup of coffee, shoot some craps, catch a lounge act, go to a dinner show, sit down front at the El Portal Theater, get a private room at any hospital or worship at any church

Can you imagine how good, law abiding, God fearing Black people had to have felt knowing that fact. The human spirit can tolerate just so much.

In mid March of 1960, the local chapter of the NAACP, under the leadership of its President Dr. James McMillan, threw down the gauntlet "Unless segregation is ended in Las Vegas within ten days, we will march on the Strip and Fremont Street". That one statement generated MORE ACTION THAN THE COMBINED ACTIVITY throughout the "green felt jungle".

Jack Entratter, the manager of the Sands Hotel, said: "How can we fight it. This is a social revolution we have to accept." Some others accused the NAACP of trying to hurt Las Vegas. They were some of the same people who, when things are not going their way, go out on strike and shut down airports, taxi companies, hotels, garbage collections, schools, fire departments, schools and anything else. As soon as a group of Black people — not because they're seeking better working conditions, better retirement, better insurance, shorter hours, longer breaks, more money and less work — but for the realization of democracy for themselves and their posterity, they become the enemies of the state. The NAACP was not SEEKING TO HURT Las Vegas but to "encourage" Las Vegas to cease hurting Black people. Dr. McMillan realized that such a protest would "bring most unsavory national publicity to Las Vegas and seriously impede its progress as a convention city". The price of freedom, however, is never cheap unless good people do the right things. Ed Fountain, City Commissioner, agreed with a recommendation that members of the resort community meet with delegates of the NAACP to discuss the

problem. Harris Sharp, on the other hand, was in opposition to "any city ordinance forcing businessmen to allow Negroes or anyone else they choose to deem unacceptable into their establishments."

The NAACP called on Mayor Oran Gragson for help. After all, were they too not part of the city? He set about trying to get the two entities to meet. He said, however, that "he could not guarantee that discrimination would end". Strip Hotel operators met at the Riviera, where Duke

those places. A few months later, the NAACP was calling on Governor Grant Sawyer for help. Sawyer was a man who could read the writing on the wall along with being a good governor. He stated very clearly that discrimination "was bad for Las Vegas and all of Nevada". There were yet some die hards who were determined that the problem would not be solved peacefully.

It was reported that the proposed meeting would be opened to the public and that there would be trouble. Hank



Oran Gragson

which permeated the entire valley. History was being made.

Robert Cannon of the Tropicana announced that "we will accept Negroes or any other racial or religious group in our hotel". Allard Roen of the Desert Inn and Stardust said that "facilities at those hotels will be open to all people regardless of race, color or creed." Dr. McMillan reported that the NAACP had "received assurances from the majority of downtown and Strip businesses that the policy of racial discrimination in Las Vegas has ended."

It was 6:00 p.m. March 26, 1960. Just twenty-one years ago.

How many times had we asked A like number we had been denied But ever that was better than

To report that we had not tried The Caesar of old, he did not listen I will not beware "the ideas of March" said he Those at the Palace, the Beachcomber and the Sultans Table Took seriously the threat, of the March of the NAACP.

Greenspun, who always seems to side with the underdog, became a kind of mediator. He arranged for a closed meeting between officers of the NAACP, the Resort Association, the Mayor and the Governor. The ten days were almost up. The meeting was held at the Coffee Shop of the Moulin Rouge and a solution was reached.

Almost to the last moment the script was played out. The town was electric. Some few were saying things like "if they try to march on the strip, we'll be waiting for them". Others were wondering: "If it does come down to a march on the Strip, will we be able to raise the projected 300 marchers?" If you've ever been somewhere at a time when high drama was being played out and the odds were much higher than the championship of the NCAA, you can imagine the aura



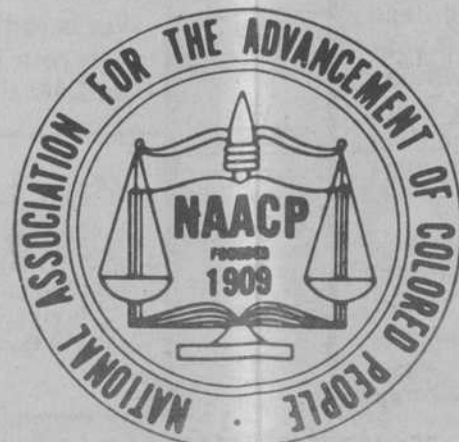
Dr. James McMillan

Smith of Elko and Richard Eugene Hickock were arrested in Las Vegas for the murder of the Herbert Clutter family of Garden City, Kansas. So what? You might ask. Well, I'll tell

of their choice in the city of Las Vegas, Nevada. Black people could not. We were not good enough. A murderer, who happened to be white, could possibly be given the key to the city.



**Professor
Fitzgerald is
director of ethnic
studies at
University of
Nevada-Las
Vegas**



Ed Fountain