

# THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT: COUNTDOWN

By Roosevelt Fitzgerald

Life goes on. For some, it seems never to change. The 1950s were filled with major occurrences and, believe it or not, most had something to do with Las Vegas.

Nuclear power really came of age during that decade and Las Vegas viewed the flashes and the mushroom clouds almost on a weekly basis. The Nevada Test Site greatly affected the future of the world and, of course, Las Vegas. Its presence brought yet another means by which Black people could be discriminated against. Perhaps, had the authorities and personnel directors realized the dangers of radiation exposure, there would have been more Black workers utilized. The Nevada Test Site episode will be a story of its own at a later date.

On January 21, 1954, the U.S.S. Nautilus was launched. Surely some of its components were developed at the test

site. As it and other nuclear devices were developed, atomic weaponry became a primary ingredient of the Cold War. On at least one occasion, President Dwight Eisenhower, threatened the use of the ultimate force.

A large number of dignitaries visited our state during the 1950s. We've already mentioned the visit of the Shah of Iran and Joseph McCarthy—the "commie" chaser. There was a numberless flow of those who came to observe the above ground detonations at Yucca Flat which were initiated January 27, 1951. In September of 1952, Mrs. Pat Nixon visited her birthplace in Ely, Nevada. Her father had been a shift boss in the mines and she had been born in a mining camp.

Black people, in Las Vegas, were generally only making the news as entertainers while ap-

pearing at the local hotels or when there were some kind of police activity. But what of the masses of the Black population? What were they doing during that time in our history which "pop" historians would have us believe was a time of "happy days" for all—a time that is described as one of hanging around drive-ins, driving red on black Ford Fairlane 500s or green on cream chevvy impalas? Well, they were trying to make a living, and they were also trying not to be taken to the "whipping ground"—a place on the Blue Diamond Road where recalcitrant Black men were taken and made an offer they couldn't refuse.

There is quite a lot that we can tell about Las Vegas during the 1950s. For our purposes, we will address the latter half of that decade. On the fifth day of February 1956, there was a full page, in a local newspaper, acknowl-

ding the forty-fifth birthday of the Boy Scouts in Southern Nevada. There were no Black boys shown. Just a few days later, the Westside School presented a play titled "Land Of The Dream Come True" in which the children acted out the meaning of American citizenship. The incongruities between what they did and how they were forced to live are unbelievable.

Black Las Vegas had become aware of what was taking place in Montgomery, Alabama. Those events which had been precipitated by Rosa Parks were to change, in more ways than one, the complexion of the domestic scene in the United States. The ebb of that pebble in the pond of racism was to touch all shores of American life. In late March of 1956, a day of prayer, in support of the Montgomery boycott, was sponsored by the local chapter of the NAACP at the Second Baptist Church at "E" Street.

On the youth scene there was also activity. While there was no great numbers of Black students in the secondary schools, the few who were active in as many extra-curricular functions as they were permitted to. Still, there were only eleven Black students among the 403 high school graduates of Las Vegas' schools. Bobby Tidwell was one of nine students who travelled to St. Louis for a music festival. To some extent, even at that time, the more creative students were much less paranoid and more prone to accepting their fellow man—the other eight students were all white.

The events in Montgomery had their effect on Las Vegas. The spirit of freedom was beginning to stir, once again, in Las Vegas. Mrs. Lubertha Johnson was elected President of the local NAACP. Membership drives were initiated. The local chapter had been active, in the past, but usually only in times of imminent crises. Such had been so in the case of employment problems during the Boulder Dam construction project and during labor disputes at Basic Magnesium. The chapter had been reactionary. It had been such because, prior to the Brown decision of 1954, Black people had been nationally considered not to be really full fledged citizens of the United States.

The organizational efforts of the NAACP was beginning to take on new directions. Attempts at increasing membership carried a new meaning for Black Las Vegas. Locals knew of the events, not only at Montgomery but also at Baton Rouge, Little Rock and other places throughout the country. They realized that a different mood was sweeping the country. No one realized, really, but a civil rights movement was in its embryonic stage.

The next four years would bear witness a westside Voters League and Robert Johnson was elected president of an organization of Young

Democrats. Mrs. Rose Daniels became Precinct Chairman of the Westside Voter Registration drive. Mr. H.P. Fitzgerald became the first Black school principal in the history of the state of Nevada. He was appointed to head the new Kit Carson Elementary School.

While those activities were taking place, Mr. and Mrs. Grant Collins were celebrating their Golden Anniversary at the Second Baptist Church. Mrs. Henry Moore, Chairman of Missions and Mrs. Lola Branch, Chairman of



publicity, organized a fund raising fashion show at Zion Methodist Church. There were other events occurring, but they are too numerous to mention.

Black men were still being arrested on a daily basis and those few police procedures in existence, at that time, never seemed to apply to them. Here, as in other parts of the U.S., Blacks who were arrested, charged and found guilty, received the maximum punishment while others lesser sentences. Some, however, began to initiate other procedures which, while they still might land in jail, at least their incarceration would be for something worthwhile—civil rights.

At the sanitation district, Black workers began to protest against working conditions and salaries. Their attempts at reciprocity did not go unnoticed. A kind of tension gripped the entire nation and often there were reprisals made against Black people who dared challenge the system.

December 1, 1955. That was the date that it all began—the civil

rights movement. On a relatively quiet street corner in Montgomery, Alabama. It seems only fitting that it should start in that place. Montgomery had been the capitol of the Confederacy almost a hundred years before. A hundred years earlier, Rosa Parks would have been officially a slave. That day, in December, she had technically been a slave and, somehow, she had looked through the veil and glimpsed freedom. It could never be the same again.

Las Vegas would change, partially

because of what she did in Montgomery. A famous author has written, in a book called *Anatomy of Revolution*, that conditions, however terrible can be tolerated for an indefinite amount of time so long as those who are being oppressed are convinced that there could not possibly be a better way. Once they discover that

their conditions can be improved, they will cease to tolerate and begin to aspire for a greater, more enhanced quality of life. The Montgomery situation focused, in fine detail, that relegation to inferior roles and positions was not the way that things had to be for Black people. It was realized, both there and here, that the risks involved in upgrading ones circumstances would be great. No one expected any help or protection from the authorities. They knew that the depths of hatred, by some avowed racists, were so entrenched that the latter would go to any extreme to "protect their way of life". Those of them who professed to be Christians did not have even a glimmer of a notion as to what Christianity was all about. Had they, they would have known from the aggregate teaching of the Bible that God does not smile upon hatred. He does not say that white people should love their white neighbors or that Black people should love their Black neighbors. Quite simply, He commands us to love our neighbors, all of them, as ourselves.

Anyone who does no do so is not a Christian — no matter who they are. Let us reinstate the Lazarus search and see how long of a list we can generate. I trust that your's will be longer than mine.

Sometimes it hard to comprehend

What causes the unusual to occur In the case of the Civil Rights movement We owe it all to her

A smallish lady, with her hair in a bun She was religious right from the start Most people, in describing her,

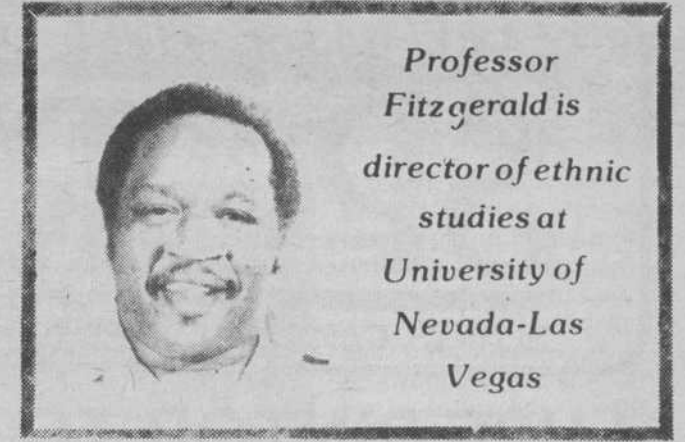
Said simply, "she has a good heart" She never meant to make a scene She only wanted to rest

They wanted her to give more than she gave And, she had already given her best "If you end up in jail, don't call me"

That is how she had been raised Having her fingers rolled across the blotter Brought an unbelievable amount of disgrace

"The Lord works in mysterious ways His wonders to behold"

But, it's difficult to deal with that



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When you're hungry, frightened and cold She was out on bail in a short while The tears welled in her eyes People who had never contemplated it Began, then, to despise How could they do a thing like that? To a lady such as she Her essence recalls to my mind What my mother means to me

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