

How the 'West Side' Came Into Existence

This is a reprint from the series of historical articles written for the Las Vegas Sentinel by Prof. Roosevelt Fitzgerald, Director of Ethnic Studies, University of Nevada, Las Vegas. This article appeared in the paper on Sept. 25, 1980. During the remaining weeks in this Black History Month, we will reprint some of the other articles featured during that series. The Las Vegas Sentinel-Voice wishes to thank Prof. Fitzgerald for his most noteworthy and valued contributions.

By Roosevelt Fitzgerald

The dam was hailed as a tremendous success. There were the official ceremonies, which were well attended, highlighted by the appearance of Franklin D. Roosevelt. After all of the hula-baloos was over and the cheering had stopped, the boom town atmosphere was over. On the eve of the rush to Nevada in 1930, there had been only 5000 residents in Las Vegas. Of that number only 150 were Black. During the next seven years, the population skyrocketed to a total of almost 20,000 with approximately 400 Blacks. Once the dam uproar ended, Las Vegas settled down to normalcy. The population dwindled to 8420 with 178 of those being Blacks.

Land values in Las Vegas began to in-

crease. That was especially true of the downtown area. While Jake Ensley, a Black businessman, was being forced out of his downtown location, Legislators in Carson City were dropping a "Race and Color Bill" which was designed to prohibit hotels and other public places from discriminating against Blacks. They were being forced from their homes in downtown Las Vegas and they were being pointed in the direction of the westside.

Probably the most important event occurring internationally, was taking place in Europe. Hitler's panzers were blitzing Poland and the rest of the world was concerned about its implications. Americans had fought the "war to end all wars" during the

first quarter of the twentieth century. They felt, in 1939, that the events of Europe was Europe's business and nobody else's. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in a September 3, 1939 fireside chat, declared that "this nation will remain a neutral nation..." and, two days later, an official proclamation was issued. By the following year, Norway, The Netherlands, Belgium and France had all fallen before the military might of Germany. Close on the heels of those events, the Battle of Britain was on.

The place which had been known as the McWilliams Townsite and, later on "Ragtown," became the future place of residence for Las Vegas Blacks. Previously, there were basically poorer whites and some Mexican-Americans living in the area. Between 1938 and 1941, almost every Black person who lived in Las Vegas had been forced to the westside. Whites who lived there began to move out because of their reluctance to live, as neighbors, with black people. Since 1865, there has mysteriously existed a belief that such association with blacks is demeaning to whites. Plantation owners would have disagreed.

In 1939-40, Las Vegas, like the remainder of the country, had not come to grips with the full implications of the war in Europe. The German war machine had done its homework well. Advanced weaponry was the result of those efforts. They were pioneers in the field of the use of magnesium. The United States had not been involved in the manufacture of that product.

Little did Nevadans realize that the Luftwaffe's persistent pounding of Britain would affect them. Parts of the former's craft and armaments were constructed of that strange new "wonder" metal called magnesium. Its use lightened the weight of their planes and its presence created a volatile incendiary characteristic for its missiles and bombs.

As the war accelerated in Europe and as the United States got more in the business of furnishing war materials to the allies, defense plants opened throughout the country. Initially blacks were once again ignored. As the revitalized economy made gains coming out of the depression years,

whites were being hired and going daily to punch the clock at the new plants. Blacks protested and, under the leadership of A. Philip Randolph, threatened a massive march on Washington, D.C. Around the city, the question most often asked was "what will they think in Berlin?" The unspoken answer was something on the order that Americans were practicing their own brand of prejudice and racial extermination. It was merely a bit slower than the ovens of the Reich.

The protest March was to take place on July 1, 1941. Because of the consistent pressure of the NAACP and the fears of national embarrassment, the federal government relinquinshed. On June 25, 1941, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802. In part, it stated "that there shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color or national origin." It ordered that all government contracts with defense industries include anti discrimination provisions.

More, however, was required. There were numerous places around the country which refused to adhere to those provisions. This was especially true of the south, which was determined to keep blacks in their economic places. Because of the problems blacks had experienced in securing employment on the dam project, the war industries which would later be established in Nevada, would surely come under close scrutiny.

Randolph and others insisted that some kind of agency be created to serve as a watchdog to insure the enforcement of the Executive Order. Roosevelt established the Federal Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) to do just that.

In less than a month, authorization for the construction of BMI had been issued. A site, halfway between Las Vegas and Boulder Dam was selected. There were numerous factors involved in the decision to locate the plant there. The dam furnished the abundant electrical requirements and the area was also uninhabited and was not plagued by the numerous mining claims held throughout Nevada

by individual and corporate entrepreneurs.

Just as in 1930, with the coming of the dam, the news of the planned BMI project was like a magnet in attracting prospective workers. There were some Blacks who came among the throngs. The few who were among the early arrivals contacted friends and neighbors back home in Louisiana, Mississippi and other southern states, and informed them of the job opportunities here. Because of the recently passed Executive Order and the establishment of the FEPC, Blacks did not question most often asked was "what will they think in Berlin?" The unspoken answer was something on the order that Americans were practicing their own brand of prejudice and racial extermination. It was merely a bit slower than the ovens of

on that project, in the black canyon of the Colorado River, involved working in intense heat and under extreme duress. In 1941, employers were claiming, stereotypically, that Blacks could handle the intense heat much better than could whites. Every seventh grade science student knows that dark colors absorb and retain more heat than do lighter colors. Whatever the reasons, Blacks in Las Vegas had an opportunity to earn money, legitimately, and in large numbers, for the first time in Las Vegas' short history.

Basic Refractories Company of Cleveland, Ohio had mining interests in Gabbs, Nevada which was the site of large deposits of Magnesite and Burcite. Through the auspices of the newly formed Defense Plant Corp., they were enticed to begin



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

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The reason given was a complete switch from ten years earlier with the dam project. The work

extracting the materials. In order to process the minerals, two plants would be necessary. One had to be located at the site of the minerals and the other, because of the extraordinary energy and supportive needs, would be located near Las Vegas, Nevada. The plant would be known as The Basic Magnesium Corporation. Its opening would have profound impacts on the economic conditions existing in southern Nevada but, more importantly, it would have far reaching impacts on social conditions and future development of the area.

The 1940s ushered in a new era of race relations in Clark County. The decade had started with less than 200 blacks in the community and ended with a figure approaching 5,000. Several thousands of Blacks from the southeastern United States arrived here. They were not well received. Their arrival coincided with the city's removal of blacks from downtown and their relegation to the westside. They entered an already over crowded section of town.



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