

# McWilliams Townsite 1905 - 1980

tors and maids, but many owned property and ran successful businesses.

Lucretia's son, Ray Christenson, known as "Cowboy" became a well known wrangler and rider. He worked for various ranches in Idaho and Nevada and rode for the famous trail boss Uncle Henry, also known as "Black Henry," one of the most renowned cowboys in the state of Nevada. Ray later ran his own stable and often rode in the Helldorado parades and supplied many of the horses and buggies that others rode.

Another son, Buster Stevens, went to work at the age of 15 for the railroad and retired after 50 years work at age 65. Lucretia's youngest daughter, Juanita, was one of the first blacks to be educated from kindergarten thru high school in Las Vegas schools. She later married Larry Barr who was one of the first black City employees.

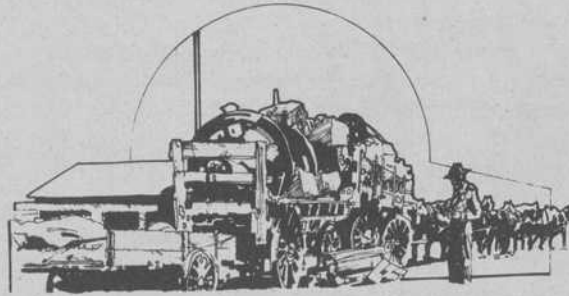
Nineteen twenty-five saw the election of John Fred Hesse as mayor. He promised the town's minorities that the Klu Klux Klan would never again march through Las Vegas. True to his word, the Klan never again burned a cross as they had previously done on the ground that now is the location of the Reed Whipple Cultural Center.

The local branch of the NAACP was organized in 1926 with A.B. Mitchell as president and Henry Wilson, another early pioneer, as secretary.

The 1928 announcement that work was to begin on the Dam project brought thousands of workers from across the country to town long before there were any jobs available. The influx of the unemployed

spilled over into Las Vegas.

Assembly Bill 98, legalizing gambling, was signed into law on Mar. 19, 1931, by Governor Fred Balzar. At the same time he signed another bill establishing only a six-week residency requirement for divorce. These acts, along with the attitudes and free-minded spirit of the West, gave Nevada the reputation of being the



brought new problems to the community because there were no jobs or housing available. Many local residents pitched in to help out the newcomers and their children.

## 1930-1940

In spite of a national Depression and the fact that Las Vegas was rejected as unsuitable as a government town, the early 30's were years of rapid growth and relative prosperity for Las Vegas. Prohibition ended, gaming was legalized, the tourist and divorce trade began to appear, and the money from dam workers residing in Boulder City

"Last Frontier of the Union."

The first real resort in Las Vegas, The Meadows, opened in May of 1931 at the enormous cost of \$300,000. The Meadows was considered a high class establishment as it required patrons to dress for dinner. Other nightspots, such as The Black Cat, Red Rooster, and The Venetian Ballroom, soon followed.

By the mid-30's, celebrities began to flock to Las Vegas. Some favorite stars, such as Clara Bow and Rex Bell, decided to make their homes here, but others came to obtain di-

voices or to enjoy the nightlife. Auto courts began to appear as a public no longer on gas rationing put Las Vegas on their itinerary of places to see in the U.S.A. In 1935 Las Vegas initiated its first Helldorado celebration of the old West, which still occurs each May.

Even though thousands of people moved to the area in the 30's, the black population was only about 150 or about 2.7% of the population.

In 1930 blacks lived interspersed with whites and other ethnic groups in essentially an eight-block area downtown which spread from First to Fifth and from Stewart to Ogden. Prior to 1931, there was no segregation in Las Vegas, but when people from other parts of the country began to pour into the area they seem to have brought their prejudices with them.

Consequently, the construction of Hoover Dam was not the boon to the black population that it was to the town in general. At first, Six Companies, the organization building the dam, refused to hire any blacks at all. And in 1931 the Colored Citizens Labor and Protective Association of Las Vegas, which was organized to furnish skilled workers in all vocations, brought in William Pickens, the Field Secretary of the NAACP to speak against discrimination. Nevada U.S. Senator Tasker Oddie began to investigate the matter and later President Roosevelt became aware of the situation.

Finally, in June, 1932, Six Companies agreed to hire blacks and by July the first ten were hired. A total of 44 were employed during construction: 30 as miners in the diversion tunnels and 14 as common laborers.

Segregation rapidly became a way of life in Las Vegas. Residents, who had been in town since its inception and

had long been used to personal freedom, found themselves even banned from bars and restaurants they formerly frequented.

In spite of this new attitude, some blacks continued to run prosperous businesses. Marion Wilson owned and operated the Gateway Hotel on Stewart and Main for some years and it was about this time that Tom and Azelle Harris ran the only ice cream parlor in town.

In 1931 Jake and Donnie Ensley, affectionately known as "Uncle Jake" and "Aunt Donnie," arrived in Las Vegas with their son, Boysie. They became familiar figures around town and successfully ran the Oklahoma Cafe on First Street for several years.

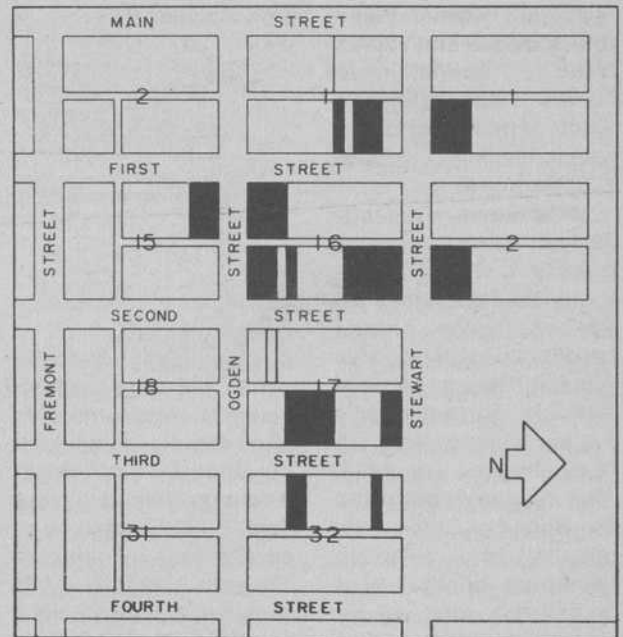
A first was achieved in 1935 when Percy Powell became the first black to graduate from Las Vegas High School and

By the late 30's, movements for legal equality began when some residents of the McWilliams townsite petitioned City hall in 1939 to prevent blacks from living in certain sections, but the City announced this would be in violation of the United States Constitution. By Fall of the same year, the local NAACP petitioned the City Commission for an ordinance to give all residents equal privileges in all recreation facilities owned or used by the City, however nothing was done on this issue.

A "Race and Color Bill" was introduced to the state assembly in 1939 which required that persons of all races and colors be given equal rights in public places. This bill was postponed indefinitely.

At the close of the decade, Europe was at war and many Americans thought U.S. participa-

BLACK OWNED PROPERTY IN DOWN TOWN AREA



was given a party by his classmates. Traditionally, schools especially above elementary have not been segregated in Las Vegas.

Economics prompted many blacks to relocate to "Old Town" on the original McWilliams townsite during the 30's because rents were generally lower. This area later was called the Westside and eventually West Las Vegas.

Rationing and shortages would again appear in Las Vegas but new military installations would contribute to growth.

## 1941-1950

With war raging in Europe, Las Vegas' population took a great leap, growing from about 16,000 in 1940 to approximately 34,000 two

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