

# HOW THE RAILROAD BECAME THE BLACK MAN'S

By Roosevelt Fitzgerald

It required quite a lot of effort to bring the railroad to Las Vegas in 1905. The track was laid on some of the most arid and rugged land on the North American continent. Not everyone was interested in that kind of work. Fortunately for some, major immigration was underway and thousands of newcomers were arriving daily from southern Europe. They furnished a new wave of cheap labor and the cheap labor already present was slowly displaced. Blacks, Mexicans and Asians were among the latter.

1905 was, in so many ways, an uneventful year as far as the country is concerned. We were five years into a new century and those over five years old had the distinction of having lived in two centuries. In international affairs, the Russo-Japanese War was the dominant event. The Portsmouth Peace Conference, which ended that war on August 9, returned the world to a quiet time. On the domestic scene the Wooblies were organized in Chicago. Yellow fever

broke out in New Orleans. George Bernard Shaw's "Mrs. Warren's Profession" was closed by New York police on vice charges and the Supreme Court in the case of Lochner vs. New York, rendered a decision involving the maximum number of hours that bakers could work per week.

In Nevada, James J. Jeffries defended his world heavyweight boxing title in Goldfield. There were less than 300 Blacks in the state at that time. Most were in the northern portion. There were a few in Goldfield, Tonopah and other small central Nevada towns. They worked in mining and in agriculture and there were a few who were wranglers on ranches around Elko and Winnemucca.

In 1905 Las Vegas was officially founded. Blacks participated in that event. They arrived with the work crew which brought the railroad. That crew consisted also of immigrants and some Chinese and Mexicans. There were not many, but they were working.

There were not many jobs

to be had in Las Vegas. Most of the business operations in the town were finally owned and there was not much need for hiring others on. The major industry was construction. Those few Blacks who were here either worked with the railroad or they were self employed. That condition remained through the 1920s.

The bottom fell out of the nation's economy in 1929. The great Depression was underway. It had been in operation for Blacks for a number of years. It did not become official until it reached white Americans. The depression had both negative and positive effects on Las Vegas. Not too many people were thrown out of work because there had not been too many working in the first place. Construction workers had been busy erecting a court house and a new school. Blacks were not working on those projects. Economic deprivation was one of the means by which racism manifested itself even during those days. The report of a Union Pacific Shop Federation gives us indication of how this was sometimes accomplished.

"We, the Americans of the entire shopcraft of all departments in the shops and yards on the L.A. & S.L., request that no man without their Citizen Papers be promoted or permitted to learn a trade. And that none but white men be promoted as we feel that it is not fair for us to be compelled to work with them in shops." Almost everywhere white labor tended to exclude Blacks from the unions.

As the technology of the twentieth century created more and more jobs, there became more ways in which Blacks could be discriminated. Union

membership was usually a requirement for employment. There was nothing to safeguard that employment opportunities of Blacks would be insured or protected. In the industrial centers Blacks would only get jobs when union members would go out on strike. And then only as "scabs." Their working in that capacity served only to create even more alienation.

There is a long held belief that Black people are lazy and that they will not work unless there is supervision. This notion is well over a hundred years old. Prior to 1865, one would have to look far and near to find a Black person who was not working. Most were slaves and slaves worked whether they wanted to or not. They were not paid anything for the services they performed nor did they participate in the fruits of their efforts.

There was no incentive for those in such circumstances to be concerned about making maximum efforts toward production. Their rewards would be identical whether they produced or not. The plantation owners and the overseers worked as little as possible. In light of the fact that Webster defines lazy as "disliking activity or exertion; encouraging inactivity or indolence," it appears that the adjective is more applicable to the latter group.

Even though Blacks had worked performing numerous different tasks before the Civil War, upon its completion the "cop out" of Blacks not having experience was maliciously initiated and erroneously believed.

In 1928 the Swing-Johnson Bill was passed. This authorized Congress to appropriate funds for the construction of a dam on the



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

Colorado River. It was determined that the structure would be in the vicinity of Las Vegas. Within a year the depression began and millions of workers were unemployed. The era of the hobo was upon us. There were not men who were bums, but those who wanted to work but there was no work to be had. They grabbed freight trains that criss-crossed the country following up whatever leads for work they could find. The leads did not always pan out and they would be off to "greener pastures." No race or class was excluded: Blacks, whites, Hispanics, Asians, Jews and Gentiles alike were all searching for work.

When word of the dam project hit the news, from all over the country they hit the rails — the Erie, the Western Pacific, the Central and the Kansas, Topeka and Santa Fe. All roads seemed to lead to Las Vegas and they came by the hundreds of thousands. Waiting, foraging, they slept along the side of the road and in gulleys and washes in any and all makeshift shelters.

When hiring for the dam project was finally initiated, no Blacks were hired. Upon

being brought to the attention of authorities they denied any knowledge of conscious efforts to deny employment opportunities to Blacks. W.A. Beithel, President of the Six Companies, said that he had no knowledge of "Negroes not being hired as opening arose, whenever Negroes, with experience, could be found."

Experience had not been a prerequisite to employment for others who sought work.

The contract did have a certain racial restriction. It had stated quite clearly that "no one of the Mongolian race would be hired on the project." There were other restrictions also. Basically, the contract had stated that preference would be given to American citizens who had participated in either the Spanish American War of 1898 or World War I. It was suggested that Nevada citizenship was also desired.

The latter, however, was not a strict requirement. At any rate, most of the newcomers who arrived early, had satisfied residency requirements prior to initiation of construction on the project.

Local Blacks and those



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