

Blacks Finally Organized

activity never amounted to too much. Around the country bigots were paying \$10.00 in order that they might hate someone. In Las Vegas, there were not enough minorities, including Jews, Catholics, Italians and Greeks, to insure one day that they would get their money's worth.

In 1933, during the construction of the Boulder Dam, gambling was legalized in Nevada. The erection of the Eighth Wonder of the World was already attracting visitors to the city. By the time the dam was completed, during the middle of the "Depression" years, a quarter million tourists, per year, were visiting southern Nevada. The climate, the beauty of the desert and the excitement of gambling in saloons with true western motifs, immediately caused Las Vegas to take on an air of distinction. It maintained its wild west atmosphere. Honky tonk music, five card stud, ladies of the evening, roulette, on occasion a faro game, outlaws (the mob), and speeding 1937 chevys turning corners on two wheels were not unusual.

By 1940, the racial climate had begun to change for the worse. Before, Blacks could enter any establishment in Las Vegas as patrons. They could order whatever they wanted and they paid for what they got just as everyone else. It was "a pig in a poke" and one just hoped for the best. The outcome had nothing to do with race. Pearl Bailey recalls arriving in Las Vegas in 1941 and that she "played the machines" in some of the establishments. She also recalls that "a few years later 'people of race' were barred" from those same places. For a decade and a half, Blacks could not be found in entertainment establishments as patrons, only as maids and janitors or porters. Josephine Baker, during the early 1950s, insisted that there be Blacks in the audience while she did her performances. Some of those "domestics" were hustled off, properly garbed and seated at a nice table right up front, dead center. Racial policies in Las Vegas were obviously different from those found in other parts of the country. It almost seems that proprietors sought to anticipate the attitudes of

their customers. It is possible that an error was made.

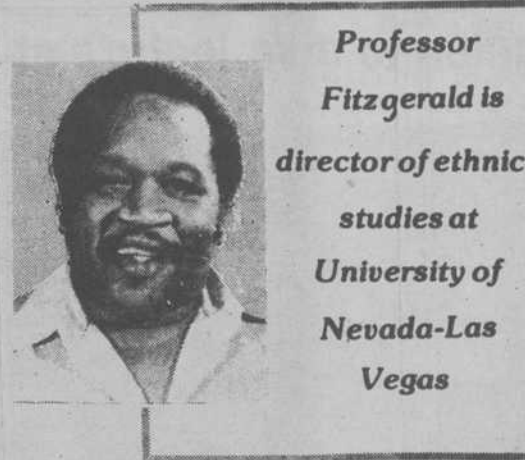
By 1955, Sammy Davis and the Will Mastin Trio were given accommodations at the New Frontier. Prior to that time, even Black entertainers could not secure lodgings in any of the hotels of Las Vegas during that fifteen year period. They were expected to secure quarters in "private Negro homes on the Westside." In 1955, also, the Moulin Rouge, the first "integrated" hotel opened. That event was well received by the public and favorably reported on by the local press. Five years later, in 1960, segregation in the entertainment industry, following a threat of demonstration by the local NAACP, ended. There was no violence in its wake. The power structure simply agreed to end it. Room bookings did not diminish. Tourists arriving in April of that year would not have believed that just a month before, a black person could not purchase a cup of coffee in downtown Las Vegas or on the Strip.

The history of segregation in Las Vegas' hotel industry was very brief. The founders of the industry, through short sightedness, sought to develop a resort which would cater to the wealthy and the wealthy were all white. They realized also that Black people were on the very bottom of the economic totem pole because they, and others like them, had deprived Blacks of educational and employment opportunities. How much could a person who only earned \$35.00 a week afford to spend for entertainment? Very little. Blacks were

forced to be window shoppers even though they were spending 100 percent of their earnings. Their spending, however, was simply to survive. They could not afford to have expensive fun.

Approximately twenty major hotels opened in Las Vegas during the two decades following completion of the dam. All had, however limited, some involvement in segregation. Those which have opened since March of 1960 have no such involvement. This is not to say that such behavior on the part of individual employees does not occur. There have been instances, in which employees' racial attitudes have manifested themselves. A waiter or waitress might be slow in attending to the needs of customers purely on a racial basis. There are times, during the shift changes, when such delays are to be expected and one needs to recognize when such is indeed the case.

In most instances the Maitre d' & Captains are top flight people. Seating is generally done on a first come first serve basis. However, there are quite often the matter of "tokens" generating better seating. Usually, there are select seats reserved for "high rollers" or other expected "VIPs." Most people can accept those differences. Blacks, especially, become concerned upon observing that they and other Blacks are all seated in either the same area or in congruent areas in a showroom -- in the wings, near the back or so near the stage that all which can be seen are the knees of the entertainers. Most is also concern. Most



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tourists know little of the procedures of the numerous games being played. Blacks are very much aware of subtle and blatant reproaches they might receive. A white patron's inquiries of the machinations of craps, baccarat or roulette are generally cordially addressed by dealers. The thinking being, "the more they know about the games, the more they will want to gamble, and the more cash flow the casino can hope to generate. Some dealers are very curt in their responses to similar inquiries made by Black patrons.

The fault is not totally that of those few bigoted "front of the house" employees. Personnel directors should make periodic statements in "in house" publications on the need for universal courtesies to all patrons which is not only expected on all employees but, also, that anything contrary to such policies will not be tolerated and failure to comply will warrant dismissal. Some-

times, such behavior is encouraged by Black by their creating an atmosphere of being grateful for simply being allowed the privilege of being there. Blacks must consciously realize that no one is doing them a favor by taking their money.

Increasingly, hotel/casino owners are becoming cognizant of the negative impact some employees are having on their operations. Those who recognize their responsibilities to their patrons, the hotels and the shareholders are either demanding changes in attitudes, at least on the job, or they are dismissing those recalcitrant racists whom they do not wish representing the hotels. It is the person who comes into direct contact with the tourist who create the problems and it is management, on its highest levels, which must face the flak. During the mid 1960s, Governor Grant Sawyer told us that "racism will hurt tourism" and, unattended, it will.

Some few of the smaller operations in Las Vegas have posed problems which negatively affect the entire industry. Complaints are often registered with the Nevada Equal Rights Commission concerning some few discos who persist in excluding Blacks. They, by no means, are representative of Las Vegas entertainment as a whole. Most businesses have recognized that while a person's skin color might be different, the cash is all the same -- green. They are primarily in business to make money, not friends.

In July 1977, a report was filed with the Las Vegas Convention/Visitors Authority on Attitudes towards Las Vegas among Black Men and Women. The study involved several divergent urban areas around the U.S. As a result of that study, some advertisements were placed in magazines generally read by Black people. There is a large percentage of Blacks who do not read those but, rather, such as Newsweek, People, Playboy and Time. There is also the necessity to not create the illusion, by segregation in advertisements, that there is segregation in Las Vegas. Such ads should be run in all magazines and newspapers. Locally produced television advertisements and newspapers must also play a role. Once the tourist arrives here, there must be indications that Blacks are involved in the "Whole ball of wax" both as tourists and as citizens of Las Vegas.

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