

Equal Opportunity In Employment? What Do You think?

By Roosevelt Fitzgerald

Waiting. That is what Blacks were doing in Las Vegas midway through 1932. They were waiting to be hired on the Boulder Dam project while others were going to work and earning a living. Blacks were watching, waiting and hoping that the power structure would relinquish and permit them to work. A year and a half after the project had been initiated and after whites who had been hired on the project had earned more than whites had earned more than \$2,000.00, Blacks were still waiting. They had to provide for food, shelter and other necessities for their families the best way they could.

By today's standards, that amount of money does not seem like very much. In 1931, however, it was a great deal. The workers were earning, at the very minimum, twenty dollars per week. Rooms were renting for as little as three dollars per week for those who were not living at the dormitories at Boulder City. A dollar per day for food was more than sufficient and, for those with families, ten dollars per week furnished their weekly needs. Blacks did not have access to those luxuries. No matter how much they would earn in the future, it would never off-set or make-up for that which they were not then earning.

For a period of time, the penniless who pounded the pavement pursuing paychecks were pathetic in their pathos and their positions became increasingly perjorative even while their paladins, the NAACP, and the CCLPA, pushed for parity. It would not be until July of 1932, that their exclusion would finally be ended with the hiring of ten of their numbers to work force at the dam.

By the time those first ten Blacks were hired on the project, their numbers who met the basic requirements for employment greatly exceeded the initial figure of

thirty-seven. The hiring of ten Blacks out of a 4000 plus work force was anything but fair. Those first ten were not received with open arms. It is said that "NIG," the dog mascot, was born about March of 1932 and that he wandered onto the dam site as a small pup. His arrival would have approximated that of the first Black workers. Phil Lawson, who arrived at the dam site in 1931, recalls that the dog was initially called "nigger" because it was so black. That name was later shortened to "nig." The perception of Blacks had been bad prior to their being hired on the project. Once they reported for work that perception deteriorated.

Part of the cause of the problems Blacks encountered in seeking employment goes back to the historical perception of slavery and slaves. When whites are doing the same kind of jobs as are blacks then their perception of themselves becomes that which they have of blacks. It was commonly believed that Blacks were incapable of doing anything which required any degree of intelligence. For blacks and whites to be doing the same jobs could only mean one of two things -- "either blacks were not as 'dumb' as

whites thought them to be, or whites were not as intelligent as they had believed."

As a continuing effort to protect the interest of local Blacks and because of the seemingly universality of segregation and discrimination in all local organizations, Black veterans organized VFW Post 2668. The local white VFW Post 1753 did not admit Black veterans to membership. This, along with the NAACP and the CCLPA, continued to carry on on the fight for additional jobs for Blacks. As of September, the local labor office reported that "at the present time twenty-five" Blacks were working on the project.

Just as was the case with everything else, Blacks worked in segregated crews. Charlie Rose was in charge of the Black crew working at the dam. They not only worked by themselves but they also lived by themselves and they ate by themselves. The supervisor of the cafeteria at Boulder City did not recall ever seeing Blacks eat on the premises. Since there had been no provisions made for their living at Boulder City they lived away from Boulder City. It was an ongoing battle for Black workers. Turnovers continued but

replacements were usually white unless one of those tiring of the canyon's heat happened to be a member of the Black gang of workers.

Conditions still had not really improved nationwide as far as jobs go. Prospective workers continued to flood Las Vegas. The rate of increase of Black workers was very slow even though the local Labor Office supposedly worked in harmony with the CCLPA. In later months the number of Blacks allowed to work on the project fluctuated. At its technical peak in 1932, there were but 116 involved in

engineering, warehouse and office operations. There were 49 doing electrical work and 309 in the mechanical division. It is clear, from those figures, that the need for technical training was not a requirement for the majority of workers on the project. Most were common laborers.

When the diversion tunnels were completed, the task of preparing the river bed for the purging of concrete was the next order of the day. The centuries of silt which had accumulated had to be removed. No particular skill was required

to "get the muck" out. In spite of that reality, the number of Blacks working on the project had increased to only 11 by 1934.

Progress on the Boulder Dam was ahead of schedule. It had been estimated that the work would be completed in December of 1937. By 1934, it was more than half finished. It was becoming more and more apparent that soon the work on the dam would be completed and the number of jobs would decrease. In June of 1934, bids were opened for the construction of the Grand

See EQUAL, Page 8



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