

'Then It Dawned Upon Me With A Certain Suddenness That I Was Different From The Others'

By Roosevelt Fitzgerald

"Say buddy, can you spare a dime." During the 1930s, dimes were few and far between. Panhandlers abounded from coast to coast. On street corners in New York City, peddlers sold apples, chestnuts and even firewood. Along the thousand of miles of railroads which criss crossed the country, there could be found "hobo" camps wherever any kind of water supply was available. Riding the rails or, as one writer put it "Taking to the open road" was the order of the day for most men. Any woman who did such a thing was simply a tramp with the malicious definition.

Las Vegas became an overnight boom town. Over forty-two thousand letters of inquiry arrived from prospective job seekers. These, and those thousands of others who arrived daily, were a constant threat to Las Vegas who felt that they should have preference with whatever jobs that might become available. The ever increasing incidences of itinerants interested in invading the imminent industry invoked the ire of indigents who became increasingly infuriated by those infringements.

Local whites had gained employment protection through the strength of their organizations and unions. Blacks were on the verge of becoming involved in employment through their establishment of self-help organizations. Those Black organizations came into existence because white Las Vegas had consciously excluded Blacks from participating in "white" organizations especially those which had any kind of economic or social bearing. The CCLPA had been

founded in 1931 by McCants, Allbritton, Simpson and Liddell as officers, the NAACP had been initiated much earlier. Both organizations had, as a major part of their direction, the task of obtaining employment for those who were being ostracized and thereby enhancing their quality of life. As a result of their efforts more and more attention was brought to bear on the truly pitiful condition in which blacks were being forced to live. The impact of the condition was heightened by the unusual activity taking place in Las Vegas as preparations got underway for the actual construction of the dam. There was quite a lot of preliminary work which had to be done. Among those were the tasks of constructing a road from Las Vegas to the dam site, constructing a railroad to carry heavy equipment, the erection of power lines from southern California, the

erection of Boulder City as a dormitory camp for the workers and even the beginning of the construction of the All American Canal in southern California's Imperial Valley.

It is apparent that there was quite a lot of work being done in Las Vegas. It is equally apparent that the majority of the work was being done by recent arrivals. Las Vegas' population had not been sufficient to fill all of the jobs created by the beginning of the dam project. The president of the Six Companies had said that Blacks would be hired when additions to the force were made. Additions were constantly being made. During the first year of construction of the dam project, thousands of men had been employed, there was a constant turnover in the labor force. The work was difficult and the heat of Black Canyon was almost unbearable. On top of that, there was also the occasional, deaths due to accidents. The workers were not earning a lot of money and some felt that their rewards were not worth the risks they were expected to take. Some, as soon as they had a grubstake, headed for cooler climes.

The obvious result of those events is that thousands of different men appeared on the roster of workers. An example of the high turnover rate may be shown by reference to just one month: "During the first fifteen days of December the labor turnover averaged thirteen per day... There were three-hundred thirty-nine men hired during this period." Most months were that way and December, as we all

know, is not a hot month. However, in spite of all of those changes, none of those even hired were Black, and that trend generally continued throughout the construction of the dam even after the first Blacks were hired.

Quite a bit of confusion existed in the entire hiring process. Preference was to be given to Nevada residents who were also veterans, but newcomers to the area quickly fulfilled residency requirements. The local Chamber of Commerce became involved in a program of identification. It stated that it "is not registering men who have lived here less than one year," and that it had "checked the references and approved of 138 white men and 37 colored men who have been residents a year and longer." According to that tabulation there were a total of 175 men who were bona fide residents that had been checked. Whether the Chamber's report was exhaustive or all-inclusive is not very important. What is important is the fact that such a small number of



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Blacks should not have presented much of a problem as far as employment is concerned. They did. Had the Las Vegas Labor Office functioned with even the minimum degree of fairness there would have been no problem as far as the employment of Blacks of the project is concerned. However, as usual, force was necessary to insure Blacks equity in employment opportunities.

Blacks were kept on the outside. They had to make a living and the only way that was left to do that was by doing menial jobs, when

possible, or by involvement in illegal activities.

All too often, when what is right is done it is made to appear that preferential treatment is extended to Blacks -- just the opposite is true. Blacks have never received such treatment and are in the condition they are simply because some white have been afforded such treatment. After all of the effort to gain employment on the dam and after such a glowing account of the "Americanism" involved in their being hired, Blacks were not yet out of the woods.

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