

THE RECORDER RECORDS HIMSELF

By the time you read this I will be completing my term as Chairman of the Anthropology/Ethnic Studies Department at UNLV. Actually, I really did not want to write this but it has to be done and time is running out. My final day in that position will be June 30 of the current year, but, in reality, it shall come to an end on the 29th--a Friday. There will be no school on the 30th so even though I will still be Chair there will be nothing to chair. Even though I usually spend a good part of the day and night on the campus, that Friday will take on an added significance because it will mark the end of an era. I will make personal copies of everything that I will be called upon to sign on that day because of its historical importance.

By the way, I know eras generally run a bit longer than two years, but, in this instance, there will be a dispensation.

Somehow, I feel that I am either blowing this occasion all out of proportion or others fail to recognize its significance. Do not misinterpret my meaning. I have not, by any stretch of the imagination, been the best Chair ever. During my two year tenure I enjoyed a few triumphs but I agonized through far more defeats. Many of those defeats, I'm told, would have taken place no matter who would have been chairman. Still, I am a product of the old school of thinking; we must be perfect, ever critical of ourselves and never satisfied. I should say, however, that success and/or failure were not uppermost on my list of concerns going into the venture. There was something far bigger than either.

With my election to the position two years ago, I became the first black person to be elected and to serve as chair of an academic department in the history of the University System in the State of Nevada. Three or four years earlier, in another department on the campus of UNLV, there was a black faculty member elected chair, but for reasons not at all clear to me, that person did not actually serve as chair. To me, my election and subsequent service as chair is significant.

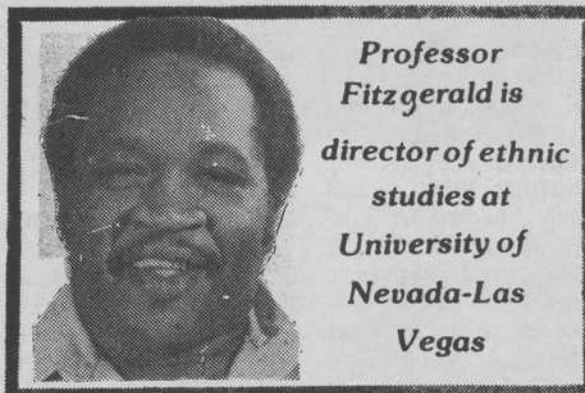
Our's is a young state. We were admitted into the Union in 1864, only 126 years ago. A grant was made for the

establishment of a University the same year. Although Nevada did in fact enter the Union as a free state, both its territorial and earliest state constitutions included restrictions, limitations and exclusions in regards to blacks and other racial groups. Those excursions account for the long history of our absence in many instances of the history. It is because of the almost hundred years of prejudice and discrimination which permeated all of the entities within the state that I am not given cause to wonder why it took so long for the election of a black university departmental chair to occur.

The Brown case of 1954 was something of a turning point in race relations in the United States. Black people generally thought that the Supreme Court decision would put an end to discrimination, especially in education. It did not. Most places ignored it completely while others did as little as possible in order to create the illusion of compliance. Nevada followed the latter tact. When we consider that the first black faculty member to be hired by the only university in the state did not take place until near the end of the 1950s, it is little wonder that my trailblazing experience did not occur until 1988. UNR does not have an exact date, but it is confident that the first black faculty member was not hired there until the late '50s. That approximates the establishment of UNLV (Nevada Southern) in 1957.

Eight years following its founding, the first black faculty member at UNLV was issued a contract. With that beginning, black faculty numbers eventually rose to a high of about a dozen in the early 1970s to its present low of half-a-dozen. Even though these figures are sadly low they are and have been, for the past two decades, higher than those at UNR.

When first approached and asked if I would be willing to serve as chair, I had ambivalent feelings. While I felt complimented I also recognized that my not being an Anthropologist would place me at a disadvantage in such a position. Because of that limitation, the odds of my fouling up more often than an anthropologist in that position were greatly increased. My definition of a leader is one with enough



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by Professor Roosevelt Fitzgerald

ego to withstand mistakes. An egoless person who makes an error is devastated. The other learns from the error and goes on. I am more like the latter. I have made thousands of mistakes, but I've never made the same mistake twice.

That notwithstanding, was not the deciding factor. While I did not really think I stood any chance of being elected, my incentive for agreeing to stand for the position was a result of my realization that there had never been a black chair of an academic department in the University System in the history of the state and my awareness that, because the already scant number of black faculty on both campuses was shrinking yearly, the chances of a black faculty member becoming chair of a department grew more slim.

I asked myself if being the first active black chairman was important to me. The historian part of me answered yes and the black part of me answered no. It is not encouraging knowing that my school is so far behind that it has taken all this time to move this short distance forward. Further, even though there is no love

lost between the school and the state and myself, someone must save the school embarrassment. Imagine, going through the 20th century without having had a black chairman.

There are many departments on both campuses where there have never been a black faculty member. Those departments, obviously, cannot elect a black chairman. As of this writing, to my knowledge, only in three departments on the campus of UNLV can there be found black faculty members. There is not a semester which passes that I do not have students who are preparing to graduate, tell me: "You're the only black professor I've had since I've been here." Similar sentiments are voiced to the handful of other black faculty here. Combined, we teach approximately 4.5% of the total student population per year. Even on the long shot that we have different students from semester to semester, in the four years of matriculation, we might see 20% of the students at the university. Those percentages are lower at UNR. It is no wonder that racial problems persist in this state. Perspective teachers

attending the state universities not only probably graduate without ever having a black professor, but they also graduate without having gained an understanding of ethnic history. How, then, can we expect them to teach minority history?

We need more black faculty. I know it's a hard bill to fill, but it can be done. All we need to do is apply the same conviction, desire and effort that is utilized in

recruiting black athletes. We always say that education is more important. Well, somebody ought to tell somebody to: "Let's get it done." Currently, black faculty comprises 1.9% of faculty members at UNLV. Somebody is responsible for that just as somebody is responsible for not having acknowledged my venture into unexplored territory, but then, paraphrasing someone else: no one needs write my epitaph--I'll do it myself.

REID

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support that bill. As a matter of fact, I am a member of the group of Congressmen and Senators that is responsible for that Act.

Sentinel-Voice: Last week the people of West Las Vegas sponsored the 1st Annual Nevada African-American Summit. Did you hear about that?

Senator Reid: No.

Sentinel-Voice: Well, it was started here in Las Vegas and it was a means of trying to get African American Nevadans from both the North and South together to address the issues that are common to both areas and to seek ways in which they can begin to help themselves. It was a very good beginning. It was a good program but we were really sorry that no one of our elected officials were present to take part. It was my understanding that everyone had been alerted and invited to participate.

Senator Reid: We didn't know anything about it.

Sentinel-Voice: We were rather dismayed that there was nobody there to represent anyone who is in office and we would have appreciated having someone there, so I don't know what happened.

Senator Reid: This is the first I have seen this program. It looks like it was a pretty interesting program.

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