

McWilliams Townsite



Photograph of BMI worker
(Special Collection, University of Nevada, Las Vegas)

(Continued from Page 4)

Ensley, affectionately known as "Uncle Jake" and "Aunt Donnie," arrived in Las Vegas with their son, Boysie. They became familiar figures around town and successfully ran the Oklahoma Cafe on First Street for several years.

A first was achieved in 1935 when Percy Powell became the first black to graduate from Las Vegas High School and was given a party by his classmates. Traditionally, schools especially above elementary have not been segregated in Las Vegas.

Economics prompted many blacks to relocate to "Old Town" on the original McWilliams Townsite during the 30's because rents were generally lower. The area later was called the Westside and eventually West Las Vegas.

By the late 30's, movements for legal equality began when some residents of the McWilliams Townsite petitioned City Hall in 1939 to prevent blacks from living in certain sections, but the City announced this would be in violation of the United States Constitution. By Fall of the same year, the local NAACP petitioned the City commission for an ordinance to give all residents equal privileges in all recreation facilities owned or used by the City, however nothing was done on this issue.

A "Race and Color Bill" was introduced to the state assembly in 1939 which required that persons of all races and colors be given equal rights in public places. This bill was postponed indefinitely.

At the close of the decade, Europe was at war and many Americans thought U.S. participation couldn't be avoided. Rationing and shortages would again appear in Las Vegas but new military installations would contribute to growth.

— 1941-1950 —

With war raging in Europe, Las Vegas' population took a great leap, growing from about

16,000 in 1940 to approximately 34,000 two years later. The Black count had even more phenomenal growth from 178 in 1940 to about 3,000 by 1943.

New military installations contributed to this expansion. Army Air Force Base (later renamed Nellis), brought in thousands of soldiers to its gunnery school. Camp Siebert in Boulder City, which served as an infantry training center, consisted of a regiment of black military police whose job was to guard and protect Hoover Dam. At its height, camp Siebert had about 1354 permanent personnel and 700 trainees. In addition, there were black troops stationed at Camp Clipper near the California-Arizona border who engaged in desert maneuvers. After training they often received weekend passes to visit Las Vegas. Pressured by military authorities, the City Commission outlawed prostitution; thereby forcing the close of Block 16.

Even though these military posts contributed to the growth of Las Vegas, the single biggest cause was the construction of the Basic Magnesium Plant in Henderson. The magnesium produced at this plant was greatly needed for the war effort because it was an essential part of bombs and airplanes. Thousands of workers both black and white were brought in from the South to work at BMI because of labor shortages. The facilities at BMI were segregated but most of the blacks were uneducated and did not rebel over things that were no different from the places they lived previously. Many, however, prepared to live in West Las Vegas rather than the company housing (Carver Park)

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Because adequate housing was not available for the bursting population, the Westside rapidly became a tent and shack city. Many people, including Woodrow Wilson, the State's first black assemblyman, lived in crowded tents with tar roofs that melted in the summer heat, dripping tar onto bedding, furniture and the occupants.

The first hotels on the Strip began to appear in the early forties. The El Rancho was opened in 1941 and the Last Frontier in 1942. Meanwhile, clubs like the Harlem Club and Frank Wilson's and Jake Ensley's Ebony Club and others sprang up on the Westside to provide entertainment for black residents and soldiers who found no place to sleep accommodated over 1,000 every month.

A few skirmishes broke out at places like the Brown Derby and Harlem Club in '43 and '44 caused by such disputes as



police authority over soldiers, but the main reason could have been resentment over segregation that many soldiers from the northern states were not accustomed to. For a time the officials at Camp Clipper declared Las Vegas out of bounds to its black troops.

Many of the newly arrived black workers were preparing to vote for the first time as they never had in the South. In the 1944 hotly contested senatorial contest between Pat McCarran and incumbent Key Pittman it was considered that it was the solid black vote which sent McCarran to the Senate in a stunning upset over Pittman.

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Near the war's end, black entertainers such as the Treniers began to appear downtown and in 1944 the Will Mastin Trio starring Sammy Davis, Jr., played the El Rancho, although they were not allowed to stay at the establishments in which they

Boulder Clubs lit up Fremont. Bugsy Siegel opened the Flamingo that year but segregation was still present. Most blacks had by this time moved across the tracks after receiving good prices for their property.

The same year, the Black U.S.O. was closed and converted into a community center with public showers as its most attractive feature, as plumbing was scarce. In 1947, a municipal pool was built on the Westside one month before the pool on the other side of the tracks.

By 1947, black entertainers were common on stages in Las Vegas, with Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Lena Horne, Louis Armstrong and Arthur Lee Simpkins appearing. By the end of the 40's, such stars as Billy Eckstine, Hazel Scott, the Mills Brothers, Nat King Cole, Pearl Bailey and the Inkspots appeared, although they had to stay on the Westside, usually at a boarding house run by Mrs. A. Harrison on "F" Street.

The importance of black entertainers to the Westside cannot be overlooked. The black stars who appeared on the Strip and downtown had to spend their

time and money in the black community. They ate, slept, and had their hair done at black businesses. They entertained themselves and gambled at black nightclubs. Because the entertainers were barred from these activities in other parts of town it's doubtful that they would have even appeared in town if services had not been available in West Las Vegas, and conversely Westside business benefited from the money they had to spend.

The Westside Chamber of Commerce was formed in 1948 with civic improvements as its major concern. The plan was a self help community clean-up program. By '49, the Westside population was around 5,000 and private builders were planning a 150 unit housing development known as Westwood Park.

That year Stanley Hunter announced his intention to turn the Biltmore Hotel into an all-black establishment since blacks had nowhere else to stay. The City Commission revoked the hotel's liquor and gaming licenses amid protests from Mayor Cragin, attorney Harry Claiborne and Woodrow Wilson, the president of the NAACP.

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