

POINT OF VIEW

Our View

Are banquets still relevant?

Oh, let's harken to the days when banquets actually meant something; when people gathered in their Sunday best to pay tribute to an honorary figure, to lament a special occasion, to celebrate a significant anniversary, to hear a meaningful message, to fellowship, to raise funds, to network.

Today, there are a glut of banquets for events both major and miniscule: when Johnny makes the honor roll or Tonya earns beauty queen honors or celebrities come into town.

But what purpose do these often high-priced get togethers serve?

In the days of yore, guests used banquets as escapes, schmoozing with people of like interests, hobnobbing with friends they haven't seen in a long time and networking. The feasts were usually cost-effective, housed in a convention center or school gymnasium, and organizers prepared the meals. There was a small-time feel, but the event went over big.

Today, as in the case with the recent Martin Luther King Jr. Committee banquet, the hotels host the festivities -- and thus horde the profits.

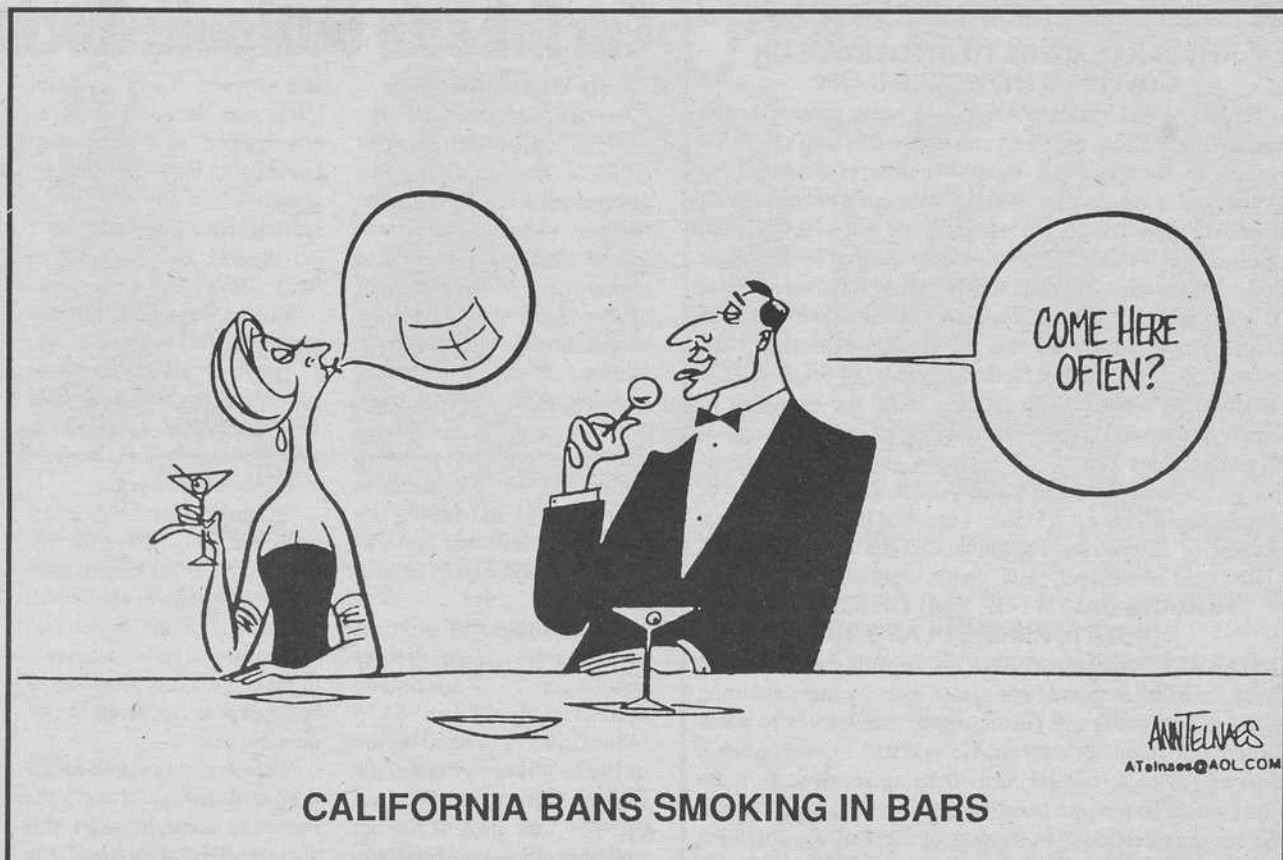
Guests shell out \$50 a plate, maybe more, to eat less-than-filling meals which are often none-too-tasty. Compound bad food with bad service and the night is a bust for most people.

Then comes the theme, as if we need a theme to come together. More and more, it seems, we grab themes out of the air, twisting and turning an idea to fit our agenda. Sometimes themes are best left alone. Rather, a goal should be identified: through this banquet, we want to sign all the guests up with memberships to our group, or get them all to register to vote, or raise a certain amount of money.

Now come the speakers — most of whom won't show up if they are not compensated in some form. Such greediness often flies in the face of the theme: "Unity through Community" or whatever it may be. But whatever happened to volunteering your time and expertise. Pastors, civic leaders and others used to jump on the opportunity to impart knowledge. Now, it's all about the "Benjamins" — money. They don't realize that service itself can be rewarding.

Once there, many speakers are unprepared or ununiformed — and thank the wrong people, the NAACP, instead of the Martin Luther King Jr. Committee for organizing the gala. Powerful speakers can save a drab banquet. Bad ones will have you clamoring for a refund, which you won't get of course.

While banquets are a necessity, let's return to the old times: where we cut costs by using our facilities and ingenuity. The hotels are already rich enough.



CALIFORNIA BANS SMOKING IN BARS

King was civil visionary and disturber of the peace

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Since his assassination in 1968 there's been a concentrated effort to "smooth off" the controversial edges of the real Martin Luther King, Jr. Some have tried to whitewash history and rob his life of meaning by making him into a cardboard cut-out figure that gets taken off the shelf for commemorative occasions like his January birth date.

They mouth a few lines taken out of context from his "I Have A Dream" speech, and then try to pretend that what Martin Luther King, Jr. stood for can be defined in ways that leave injustice intact.

But, as even a cursory examination of his life shows, Martin Luther King, Jr. had no tolerance for a status quo that was unjust and oppressive. He was a disturber of the peace. That essential quality about him cannot be hidden.


That has been wonderfully evident in the controversy that flared in Riverside, Calif. this month when the local board of education announced it wanted to name its new high school — the Martin Luther King, Jr. High School.

Mind you, this was not a school that was built primarily for African-American children. This was a school whose student population is projected to be about two-thirds white when it opens in September 1999.

The nearly 36,000-pupil Riverside Unified School District — Riverside is about 60 miles east of Los Angeles — is 44 percent White, 40 percent Hispanic-American and 4 percent Asian-American and Pacific Islander. African-American students comprise 10

To Be Equal

By Hugh B. Price
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percent.

The local, five-member board of three Whites, one Hispanic-American and one African American, apparently didn't think its tentative decision was likely to be controversial.

Instead, one of them said, it merely viewed the King High School as "the third stone in the crown of diversity," to go with the new middle school, named after aviator Amelia Earhart, and the new elementary school, named after the late Thomas Rivera, a Hispanic-American educator who was chancellor of the University of California campus at Riverside. The King school would be the first in the district named after an African American.

But many white parents objected. Those who did so publicly stressed that their objection was not racially-motivated. Rather, some said they felt the school should be named after a local person, or to honor the area's citrus tradition ("Orange Grove High," was one suggestion).

One of the 14 whites who objected at a public hearing the school board held on the issue worried that if the school were named after King, white students would have a tougher

time getting into college because admissions officials would think the school was a "black" school.

Angered and galvanized by the opposition, more than two dozen black, Hispanic, and Asian-American residents spoke in favor of naming the school after King at the public hearing.

So did at least three white parents. One said, "Any institution should be honored to bear his name. Martin Luther King influenced everyone in this country. You can't say he's not a local hero."

The school board voted unanimously for the King name.

Marilyn Johnson, vice president of the Greater

Riverside Area Urban League, said many residents "were flabbergasted" by the opposition.

"(The opponents) don't want to have their children attend a school named after Martin Luther King of all people! You can say we were surprised by it. We're more concerned now. We're more alert now."

In the brief epilogue to his brilliant 1986 biography, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*, David J. Garrow pointed out that King's family and closest friends wanted to prevent him from being turned into an idol — an icon that

(See King, Page 16)

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