

West Las Vegas changed with the decades

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Part 3 of 3
1951-1960

The '50s were years of continued growth for Las Vegas. Nevada's black population hit about 16,000 in 1955, most of it in West Las Vegas.

Slum conditions remained obvious on the Westside despite many municipal improvements. The city began blacktopping the streets and Marble Manor, a government housing unit, was constructed.

Blacks from Southern California and other areas avoided Las Vegas if possible, even traveling alternate routes to destinations because there were no available accommodations.

In 1953, a civil rights bill was introduced to the state assembly to stop all "gentleman's agreements" concerning discrimination in public places such as hotels, restaurants, theaters, and other spots of entertainment but it was never approved.

In 1954, the state attorney general began investigating charges of discrimination on behalf of the southern branch of the NAACP and branded Las Vegas the "Mississippi of the West."

In spite of continuing discrimination, progress was made in some areas. In 1954, Pardee Phillips built a new tract of homes called Berkeley Square at "D" Street and Owens Avenue which was comparable to new tracts in the other sections of town and H.P. Fitzgerald became the first black school principal.

In 1955, Dr. Charles I. West arrived and set up practice as the first black



doctor in the state and was quickly followed by James B. McMillan, a dentist, who later became the first on the state Democratic central committee.

The Sands Hotel was the first to allow black performers to stay on the premises. In 1955, while performing to record breaking crowds at the New Frontier's Venus Room, Sammy Davis, Jr. broke tradition by inviting his grandmother, stepmother and sister to sit in the front row. They were the first blacks to tear down the barriers of a Las Vegas showroom.

A major event for the Westside economy and one that seemed to hold great promise was the opening of the 6.9 million-dollar Moulin Rouge Hotel/Casino on West Bonanza. This, the first interracial resort in town, had over 200 rooms and was in every sense as elegant and plush as any hotel on the Strip. Famous prizefighter Joe Louis greeted guest at the front doors. It offered all the gaming, entertainment and comfort that could be found anywhere and featured a mixed chorus

line and the music of Lionel Hampton.

The Moulin Rouge quickly became a meeting place for entertainers such as Harry Belafonte, Louis Armstrong, Lena Horne, Frank Sinatra, The Treniers, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis, Jr., Tullulah Bankhead, Donald O'Connor, The Will Mastin Trio, Joe E. Lewis, The Mills Brothers, Gregory Peck, Dorothy Lamour, Bob Hope, Milton Berle, and many others. It's economic impact on the Westside was evident in new businesses and rising living standards of its employees. Unfortunately, business difficulties forced it to close in October only six months after opening.

That same year construction began on the Mardi Gras Hotel at "D" Street and Owens Avenue but it remained unfinished at the same location for ten years. However, the Town Tavern, which also opened in 1955, is still in operation.

Toward the end of the '50s, blacks were beginning to become organized as a political power. Because the

charter of the NAACP prohibited political activity, Dr. James McMillan and Dr. Charles West formed a political arm of that organization in 1957, which became the Nevada Voters League. The league began registering voters and became involved in the 1958 gubernatorial election.

Although no major civil rights bills were passed in the Nevada Legislature in the '50s, a bill permitting interracial marriage was introduced and passed in 1959.

Although the Nevada Voters League did not endorse Oran Gragson for mayor, he insisted he would be a mayor of all the people. When he won the election, he was the first to hire blacks in significant numbers for municipal jobs. In 1959, the first black policeman, Herman Moody, was hired soon followed by Larry Bolden, and Charles Wyatt.

1961-1970

In 1960, the gaming resorts opened their accommodations to blacks, which was a long awaited

goal but had a detrimental effect on West Las Vegas businesses. Before 1960, enterprises on the Westside had a more or less built-in clientele. Then the strip and downtown were opened to blacks. Most Westside residents preferred to frequent the establishments there and businesses on the Westside went into decline. In spite of this, the Cove Hotel was erected that year.

Approximately 20 percent of the city's population was on the Westside in 1960 with the majority being blacks. This area also constituted about 70 percent of the entire state's black population. By that year, the Voter's League had gained enough political pull to have West named vice-chairman of the state Democratic Party based on respect for the Voter's League.

The Legislature created the Nevada Commission on Equal Rights of Citizens in 1961.

Earle W. White, Jr. became Las Vegas' and Nevada's first black attorney in 1963. He was appointed justice of the peace for Clark County. He was followed

quickly to the bar by Robert Reed who became Nevada's first black justice of the peace. The city's first black firefighters, Monroe Williams and James Walker, were hired in the summer of 1963. In 1965, Helen Anderson became the first black woman school principal.

Doolittle Recreation Center located on Lake Mead Boulevard and "J" Street opened in 1965. Many local athletes spent their formative years playing in the center's gym. Some have gone on to play ball for major colleges and enter the professional ranks such as Lionell Holins and Sam and Willie Smith. The first local athlete to make it to the pros was Lee White who starred at Las Vegas High School and went on to play football for the San Diego Chargers and the New York Jets.

The fall of 1966 saw the election of the first black state assemblyman, Woodrow Wilson. Wilson was elected at large on the Republican ticket and served six years in the assembly. He was followed by other black state elected officials in the '70s.

In the fall of 1969, disturbances broke out near the Golden West Shopping Center at Highland and "H" Street. For a few days, tensions ran high reflecting the general national trend of the '60s. Some good in the form of jobs or social equality might have come as a result of these demonstrations.

1971-1980

By 1970, an estimated 20,000 blacks lived in Nevada, with most in West Las Vegas.

Compared to the 50's when black tourists avoided Las Vegas, the estimated 90,000 who visited in 1972 was staggering. According to (See History, Page 18)



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