

Visit to 'Bombingham' kindles sadness, pride

By George Curry
Special to Sentinel-Voice

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. - Growing up in Tuscaloosa, Ala., in the 1950s and 1960s, Birmingham had special significance to me. This is where the back of segregation was broken. The 16th Street Baptist Church was bombed Sept. 15, 1963, by Klansmen, killing four little girls. I was in the 10th grade when that happened, and a group of us came here from Tuscaloosa, 47 miles to the west, to protest the deaths of Denise McNair, 11, and three 14-year-olds: Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson and Addie Mae Collins.

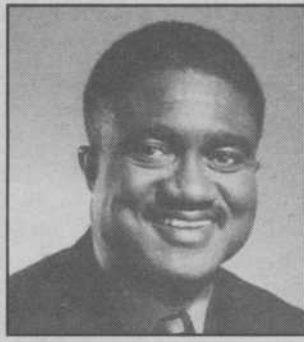
Coming on the heels of Public Safety Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor unleashing police dogs and fire hoses on peaceful demonstrators, the deaths of those four girls pricked the conscience of the nation and galvanized the Civil Rights Movement. A year after their deaths, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed. The following year, the Voting Rights Act was enacted into law.

Although I've visited the Civil Rights Institute across the street from 16th Street Baptist Church a couple of times over the years, I hadn't been in the church since the bombing. Not until Sunday night. I went there to hear Charles Steele Jr., the president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and a childhood friend, deliver his opening

convention address. Steele had told me that he wanted to present me with SCLC's president's award on Tuesday night, but I came down two days early to get a sense of where Dr. Martin Luther King's old organization is today and to watch my high school football teammate in action.

When I entered the church, I felt an odd mixture of loss and pride. The loss was profound because four young girls were killed in church. Their deaths, along with that of Emmett Till, the 14-year-old Chicago native who was killed in Mississippi for allegedly whistling at a White woman, exposed the bestiality of White supremacists in the South.

It would be 40 years before someone would be convicted of their deaths. Even more disturbing, an FBI memo to J. Edgar Hoover on May 13, 1965, stated that the bombing was the handiwork of four Klansmen that were identified by name. A 1980 Justice Department report concluded that rather than pursue the killers, FBI Director Hoover had blocked the prosecution of the former Klansmen. And people ask why Blacks are so distrustful of their own gov-



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ernment. The pride part kicked in when I realized how the sacrifices of those four girls and others had transformed Birmingham, a city once known as Bombingham because the homes of civil rights leaders were frequently bombed.

Earlier this year, at the National Conference of Black Mayors annual convention in Columbus, Ohio, I told Mayor Bernard Kincaid that even though he wasn't the first African-American elected mayor of Birmingham, I still shake my head in amusement that a Black person holds the city's highest elected office. Just steps away from the church, is Kelly Ingram Park, where police brutality ran amuck.

On Sunday night, however, it was clear that the protesters had become the protectors.

In addition to Mayor Kincaid, others represented were Lee Loder, president of the Birmingham City Council, and Larry Langford, president of the Jefferson County Commission. The police chief, Annetta Watts Nunn, was also there. All of them are African-Americans.

Forty years ago, even Dr. King could not have dreamed that these many African-

Americans would hold top offices in Birmingham. Today, Charles Steele, King's successor, doesn't have to imagine Black Power in Birmingham — he can see it.

To his credit, Steele made it clear in his speech that the battle is not over. And the former Alabama State Senator put Black officials on notice that if they don't do a better job of improving the lives of African-Americans, he will come after them with the same vigor that Dr. King exercised to challenge the White Establishment in Birmingham.

To show their support of Steele, a Who's Who of SCLC luminaries attended the convention this week: Martin Luther King III, Rev. Joseph Lowery, Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth and Rev. Jim Orange.

By the time I left church Sunday night, I realized that obituaries of SCLC were premature. While it has not regained the luster of four decades ago, my buddy Charles Steele is making sure that SCLC is again a key movement player, not only in the U.S. but around the world. As I whispered to him after his speech, "Mr. Hughes [our deceased high school principal] would be so proud tonight."

And so would Dr. King and those four little girls.

George E. Curry is editor-in-chief of the NNPA News Service.

Black America only as good as the least of its citizens

By James Clingman
Special to Sentinel-Voice

You may remember "Animal Farm," the 1945 classic written by George Orwell. Many in my generation had to read the book in high school. Over the years, I have come to see the relevance of the message in the book, even more as I look at the condition of our people.

The book is centered on the dissatisfaction of farm animals who felt they were being mistreated by Farmer Jones. Led by the pigs, the animals revolted against their human masters and after their victory, they decide to run the farm themselves on egalitarian principles. The pigs become corrupted by power and a new tyranny is established. That famous line, "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others" still rings true, even among Black people.

Is White racism the bane of Black society? Or, is Black "classism" more debilitating to our progress? I just finished reading "The Head Negro in Charge," by Norman Kelley, reminiscent of E. Franklin Frazier's "Black Bourgeoisie," and Harold Cruse's "Crisis of the Negro Intellectual," which also reminded me of Orwell's book. I plan to write an article on Kelley's HNIC later, but for now, let me highly recommend his book to all of you.

Brother Kelley makes his case with an unapologetic, equal-opportunity, call-out session of some of our Black leaders, their penchant for self-aggrandizement, and their individual prosperity rather than our collective economic progress.

But back to "Animal Farm." As he looked back on his Talented Tenth concept, W.E.B. DuBois realized his "exceptional men" saw



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their position at the top of the Black food chain as an end rather than a means. In other words, once they reached the pinnacle of what they deemed to be success, they made no attempt to reach down and pull the other 90 percent up. DuBois lamented that he had underestimated the "power of [their] selfishness over sacrifice."

In our current state, because we have not rallied our "best and brightest" Black folks, or should I say because they have not rallied themselves around using their tremendous wealth of intellectual — and financial — resources to help their people, we continue to languish and our economic fate is all but sealed. No, I am not blaming the entire "state" of Black folks on the Black elite, Cosby's remarks about the "lower economic" class of

Blacks notwithstanding.

What I am drawing upon is my personal experience with those Blacks (oops! I should have used a small "b" — I apologize) who repeatedly stand in the way of their brothers' and sisters' collective economic progress.

With all of the status reports coming out for the umpteenth time, which tell us that Black Americans are still at the bottom of every economic category, my experience with the opposing side of Cosby's "lower economic" people brings me to the conclusion that class has caused major schisms among our people.

If you honestly assess our situation, you will find that many of those who benefit from the battles fought by the "lower economic" people often disappear when their resources are needed by those who fight for them everyday. You will also see Orwell's famous line relative to equality running deep within (See Clingman, Page 12)

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Defense, on behalf of AGCA Roberts successfully challenged as unconstitutional the Department of Defense's affirmative action program granting bid preferences to small, minority-owned businesses and argued against the use of race in affirmative action programs.

In the 1990 case of Oklahoma City Public Schools v. Dowell, he co-authored a brief to limit a school district's exposure to court-enforced school desegregation decrees. Roberts ordered that Oklahoma City Schools, which had been declared "unitary" in 1977 — a finding that a school is not segregated status and not deemed separate but equal — could not again be subjected to a desegregation decree in 1985.

He took this position in spite of the fact that the school board's decision to eliminate bussing in elementary schools had resulted

in returning a number of schools, previously desegregated, to one race status.

Roberts filed another brief in Freeman v. Pitts. In Freeman, after acknowledging that the DeKalb County Georgia school system was still segregated and had failed to fulfill several "unitariness" factors regarding teacher-principal assignment, resource allocation and quality of education, the district removed the system from supervision, instructing it to remedy the factors. Parents of public school students sought to ensure the court's jurisdiction until they achieved unitary status.

Roberts ruled in favor of the school system and argued that a system whose racial makeup had changed due to demographic shifts in residential patterns when it was allegedly unrelated to prior discrimination could not be required to eliminate racial imbalances and that the court could lift a de-

segregation decree even if all six factors for unitary status had not been fulfilled. This decision loosed the requirements for which school systems that had previously engaged in de jure discrimination had to prove in order to undo a court enforced desegregation decree.

The Supreme Court has been the place of last resort for African-Americans throughout our history in this country. However, with appointments of justices like Roberts, everything our ancestors, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and countless others, gave their very lives for are being threatened while we sit by complacently and pitifully apathetic and do nothing.

A lifetime appointment to the Supreme Court is a privilege and comes with a responsibility that requires more. Every nominee bears the burden of showing that he or she is evenhanded, unbiased and committed to

equal justice. I think you can see by the few briefs that I have delineated here that Judge Roberts does not possess these characteristics and is not qualified for a seat on our nation's highest court.

Do we care whether we get a fair shake at a business venture? Do we care whether our people are treated fairly in the judicial system? Do we care whether we will continue to have the right to vote or not? Do we care if our children receive a quality education? If you care, take action. Call your state senator in Washington by dialing the switchboard at the Capitol and ask to be transferred to the Senate office and voice your opposition against the confirmation of Judge Roberts. The phone number is (202) 224-3121.

If making a phone call is too cumbersome, send an e-mail by simply going online to www.senate.gov and click on "Contacting the Senate"; look up the contact information for Nevada's Senators and those for other states.