

# THE MARCH THAT NEVER HAPPENED: DESEGREGATING THE LAS VEGAS STRIP

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At the turn of the 19th century, customary Jim Crow practices controlled behavior patterns between and among racial groups in new industrial cities as well as in the South. European immigrants were strongly resented because it was believed that they would work for depressed wages. Therefore, blacks moved from southern towns to jobs in the North and West. Chicago, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and New York developed black ghettos as migrants poured in and settled. This lasted well into the 20th century. Major conflicts between urban blacks and whites resulted from competition in the work environment. In the South, relations reflected the complexity of economics coupled with the legacy of slavery.

Black Codes, a series of restrictive laws enacted following the Civil War, fashioned a labor system that almost mirrored slavery. Black gains that did occur during and after Reconstruction were limited in scope by the Ku Klux Klan and other terrorist organizations. Gradually, Jim Crow laws legally segregated the races. Public accommodations, most public school systems, professional sports, and exercising the right to vote were denied to African Americans. Thus resistance from black communities began on two fronts, internally and externally. Black communities spawned a leadership class usually composed of the self-employed – doctors, morticians, lawyers, insurance salesmen, and preachers. Outwardly, blacks brought law suits, supported the efforts of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and “voted with their feet,” leaving familiar places to pursue equal justice and a better life.

Racism in Las Vegas increased gradually over the years, ebbing and flowing as incidences of economic recessions and times of prosperity occurred. The town quickly changed from cordial race relations in 1905 to an acrimonious state of affairs between blacks and whites in the early thirties. At that time, work on the Boulder Dam spurred racist behavior as men sought scarce jobs during the depression. Once the dam was completed, the town never regained the civility it once possessed. Instead, overt racism hardened during the World War II era as blacks migrated to Las Vegas in large numbers. When the war ended, the migration continued. Discriminatory practices became a relentless factor of every day life. Still economic in nature, the exclusionary unjust customs settled in the casino industry, the largest employer in the town, with attitudes spilling over into surrounding restaurants and theatres, essentially consuming the entire town. Very few establishments stood against the tide.

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The small number of eateries that withstood the pressure included Roxy's Restaurant on the Las Vegas Strip.

The evolution of Las Vegas began in 1905 when the San Pedro, Los Angeles, and Salt Lake Railroad selected it as the major stop on the route from Los Angeles, California, to Salt Lake City, Utah. Workers who migrated to the site for employment included African Americans. The old television image of the Wild West best described the early town. Early businesses included a number of saloons and a brothel.<sup>1</sup> Harvey Hardy, a mine supervisor in nearby Goodsprings, visited Las Vegas on Christmas Day in 1905 and described the small town as a tough place where "they get a man for breakfast near every morning."<sup>2</sup> Black men who migrated to Las Vegas and gained railroad employment were denied the use of the brothels, but their other needs were fulfilled along with those of their white co-workers. This integrated setting, though limited, differed from many small towns throughout the country, especially in the South.

The black presence in Las Vegas is a story of constant migration that began as blacks moved westward after the Civil War. These migratory waves increased and decreased from the founding of Las Vegas to the present day. The beginning trickle resulted from westward movements such as the one described by historian, Nell Painter. By 1880, 2,780 Blacks in Kansas had been born in Mississippi; 2,460 in Texas; 1,300 in Louisiana; 1,840 in Virginia and West Virginia; and 770 in Arkansas.<sup>3</sup> Painter's research revealed that this early migration depicted the freedpeople's struggle against what they saw as actual or effective reenslavement.<sup>4</sup> The migration is described not just as a move, but as an "impulse to flee" that came about from the conditions that freedpeople lived in and anticipated for the future.<sup>5</sup>

The first blacks to settle in the Las Vegas Valley did so before the 1905 founding of the town.<sup>6</sup> John Howell owned a ranch in partnership with James Wilson.<sup>7</sup> Howell's children remained and were in the area when the railroad crews laid the tracks connecting Los Angeles and Salt Lake City.<sup>8</sup> The black population grew slowly. The 1920 census listed fifty-two African Americans and property records indicated that twelve of those individuals owned property in the downtown area along with the property belonging to Zion Methodist Church.<sup>9</sup> Approximately twenty-three percent of the early black settlers owned

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<sup>1</sup> Jackie L. Ogden, *Early Las Vegas Business Establishments*, Presentation for Dr. Ralph J. Roske, History 303, Univ. of Nev. at Las Vegas (May 12, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> Harvey Hardy, *Las Vegas Christmas*, in NEVADA OFFICIAL BICENTENNIAL BOOK 273 (Nevada Publications 1976).

<sup>3</sup> NELL IRVIN PAINTER, *EXODUSTERS: BLACK MIGRATION TO KANSAS AFTER RECONSTRUCTION* (1992).

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> Roosevelt Fitzgerald, *Blacks an Important Part of Las Vegas History*, LAS VEGAS REV.-J., Aug. 28, 1980, at 1C.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> EVERETT LOUIS OVERSTREET, *BLACK STEPS IN THE DESERT SANDS: A CHRONICLE OF AFRICAN-AMERICANS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE GROWTH OF LAS VEGAS, NEVADA* 15 (1999).

property<sup>10</sup> and Clarence Ray, a self-described gambler, who moved to Las Vegas in 1925, rented living space on the property of Mary Nettles and her husband.<sup>11</sup> “All the people who rented from Mrs. Nettles were black,” Ray recalled.<sup>12</sup> “They worked in the railroad shops . . . . I can’t remember any poor blacks in Las Vegas back then, because if you didn’t have a job, you had no incentive to stay, so you’d just move on.”<sup>13</sup>

Harmonious relations existed among early racial groups. Records listed Colored, Chinese, Mexican, Greek, Austrian, and other foreigners as part of the permanent crew that remained in Las Vegas following the completion of the railroad.<sup>14</sup> Walter Bracken, land agent for the railroad, suggested that colored people and other foreigners “will be scattered all through our town” and recommended that they should live and purchase property solely in Block 17.<sup>15</sup> This policy was adhered to briefly, but the small number did not justify the extra efforts necessary to isolate the nonwhite group.<sup>16</sup> Economic opportunities allowed the participation and thus progress of the entire community since there was no competition in the job arena. This almost idyllic racial harmony ended in the late twenties when the U. S. government decided to build Hoover Dam at the present location after eight years of site testing in both Boulder and Black Canyons. Men raced to Las Vegas to secure jobs on the project; black men included.

Just ahead of the stampede, the black community began to organize. When blacks in Las Vegas learned of the possible economic impact of a dam construction project, they decided to form a branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Clarence Ray and Arthur McCants, two of the most vocal blacks, had individual experiences with the Association. Ray hailed from a family of NAACP members and had been involved with chapters in Kansas, Oklahoma, and California.<sup>17</sup> McCants had served as a local branch president in Wyoming.<sup>18</sup> Their first attempt at forming a chapter in 1928 failed, but later in the same year, Mary Nettles, Bill Jones, Zimmy Turner, Clarence Ray, and Arthur McCants became charter members of the Las Vegas NAACP.<sup>19</sup> The reasoning and timing of the group proved prophetic. In early 1930, four thousand men were hired before work actually began on the dam.<sup>20</sup> None of them were African American.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Property owners listed: Harris, Levi Irvin, J. R. Johnson, Henry Kelly, Julia Lowe, A. B. Mitchell, Vance & Grace Moore, Sam Nettles, Lucretia Stevens, Ike Pullam, Henry Wilson, Maria Wilson, and Zion Mission Property. *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> CLARENCE RAY, CLARENCE RAY: BLACK POLITICS AND GAMING IN LAS VEGAS, 1920s-1980s 22 (Helen M. Blue ed., Univ. of Nev. Oral History Program 1991).

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> Roosevelt Fitzgerald, *The Evolution of a Black Community in Las Vegas: 1905-1940* 2 (1981) (unpublished manuscript, on file with Univ. of Nev. at Las Vegas, Lied Library, Dep’t Special Collections).

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*

<sup>17</sup> RAY, *supra* note 11, at 40.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 41.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at 43.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

Black settlers stayed and formed the core of the Las Vegas African American community. Both Ray and McCants were relative newcomers. We know that Ray arrived in 1925 and that McCants was not on the 1920 census records. In Ray's later oral history recollections, he names almost every black family in Las Vegas but does not include McCants.<sup>22</sup> Las Vegas did not engage in a Civil Rights Movement that can be defined with beginning and end dates. Instead, blacks waged a constant drive for equality from 1930 continuing to the present day. It is my belief that the leaders of the relentless series of pushes for equal rights were outsiders who toiled for civil liberties for a period and would then stepped aside to allow others with new ideas and novel strategies to take the reins of the struggle. Each migratory wave brought new leadership that pushed the black community toward the goal of full integration. As political, social, and economic attachments to the city deepened, leadership groups changed. When Martin Luther King, Jr. was chosen to lead the Montgomery Improvement Association, he had no deep roots in Montgomery, no longtime friendships, no allegiances, and no attachments with either blacks or whites. Ray, McCants, and others in the indigenous group, the middle class migrants of the 1940s, and the professionals who came in the mid-1950s led significant phases of the constant civil rights strides needed to bring equal justice to the black community. None enjoyed strong ties to the community when they arrived. This chapter tells the story of the segmented journey toward the monumental accomplishment of desegregating the renowned Las Vegas Strip. This ongoing struggle was not just about the color line between black and white, but about the class line within the black community.

Once the NAACP founders learned of the hiring practices at the dam, they acted immediately. This group and others that composed the original leadership class became activists to ensure just treatment for black men who sought jobs at the dam site. They responded to the situation in two distinct ways. First, prominent community activists formed a Colored Citizens' Labor and Protective Association to locate and prepare the proper candidates for dam employment. Second, they contacted the regional NAACP representative, William Pickens, known as the troubleshooter. Pickens arrived, was welcomed by the mayor Ernie Cragin, and delivered a speech in the Majestic Theatre building.<sup>23</sup> He reminded the audience composed of the combined community that "[t]his is taxpayer money that you're spending" to build the dam.<sup>24</sup> Shortly after this visit, blacks found that jobs had become available to them.<sup>25</sup> Historian, Eugene Moehring, told the other side of the dam hiring story. Mayor Cragin contacted Senator Tasker Oddie who pressured Interior Secretary, Ray Wilbur, into changing the contractor's hiring policy.<sup>26</sup> This chain reaction, initiated by local black leaders, afforded forty-four black men the opportunity to

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<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at 40.

<sup>23</sup> RAY, *supra* note 11, at 43.

<sup>24</sup> *Id.* at 43-44.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.* at 44.

<sup>26</sup> EUGENE P. MOEHRING, *RESORT CITY IN THE SUNBELT: LAS VEGAS, 1930-1970* 175 (Wilbur S. Shepperson ed., 1989).

acquire employment during the Great Depression.<sup>27</sup> The dam provided work for 20,000 whites.<sup>28</sup>

This first encounter of the black community and the white power structure resulted in not just a minimal number of jobs but also with an expanded NAACP branch. Clarence Ray stated that “almost every black in town was a member of the NAACP.”<sup>29</sup> This cohesive group faced several other challenges before the 1930s ended. They fought for a race and color bill in the Nevada assembly and they relocated their entire community to an area across the railroad tracks called the Westside. The term “Westside” carried a derogatory connotation. It is still remembered as “ragtown” and “tent city,” but for this dissertation chapter and later book, it will be referred to as the “Historic Westside,” the moniker used by Jackie Brantley, a descendant of one of the early black families.<sup>30</sup>

Management and workers on the dam construction project blanketed Las Vegas with a cloud of racism. They transported their prejudices into the Las Vegas Valley and the local white community accepted the workers’ bigotry along with their spending money. This was the Great Depression and Las Vegas avoided the suffering experienced by most of the country by embracing racism. The greatest obstacle to this prosperity was a well integrated town where blacks and whites lived in the same neighborhood. Fortunately for the founding fathers, there was a scarcely populated community just beyond the railroad tracks that gave them a way out of their dilemma.

Blacks needed a place of their own for other reasons as well. In 1931, casino-style gambling became legal in Nevada. Neither the new white tourists nor the white dam workers enjoyed the company of blacks as they engaged in the pleasures of Las Vegas. So gradually, African Americans moved to the old McWilliams Townsite that was originally surveyed and used as the early town of Las Vegas. Around 1904, a Canadian born surveyor and civil engineer, John Thomas McWilliams, purchased eighty acres of land on the west side of the railroad and laid out a Townsite.<sup>31</sup> He designed wide avenues and sold lots through 1904 and early 1905.<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, the newly completed railroad established its own subdivision as the core of today’s downtown Las Vegas.<sup>33</sup> Many settlers who bought lots from McWilliams and “erected permanent structures put them on skids and dragged them across the tracks to the new Townsite.”<sup>34</sup> In the late 1930s, a forced reversal of that process began. City officials refused to reissue licenses to black businesses in the downtown area and suggested that they would issue the license if the business moved to the Westside of the tracks.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Id.*

<sup>28</sup> *Id.*

<sup>29</sup> RAY, *supra* note 11, at 45.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Jackie Brantley, in Las Vegas, Nev. (Las Vegas Women in Gaming and Entertainment Oral History Project, Oct. 27, 1996).

<sup>31</sup> K.J. Evans, *Battling the Big Boys: J.T. McWilliams (1863-1941)*, in THE FIRST 100: PORTRAITS OF THE MEN AND WOMEN WHO SHAPED LAS VEGAS 23 (1999).

<sup>32</sup> *Id.*

<sup>33</sup> *Id.*

<sup>34</sup> *Id.*

<sup>35</sup> Bob Palm, *Ghetto Hit LV Spotlight in 1950s*, LAS VEGAS SUN, Dec. 27, 1977, at 3.

This move, though forced, allowed the black community to prepare to live a different social, cultural, and economic lifestyle. More entrepreneurs would have to open businesses to make life more comfortable in the new Historic Westside community. Established services in the downtown area would now require duplication. A whole new way of being had to be demonstrated to force the fledging community to provide an adequate economic infrastructure. Blacks gathered the necessary ingredients to create a viable and dynamic neighborhood that sustained families, encouraged a steady stream of migrates, and supported a fluid class structure.

Though unusual even for the Jim Crow Era, this relocation into an area of substandard infrastructure came as no surprise when an examination is made of the tone and texture of newspaper articles about the black population. In the early 1930s, the reporting seemed even-handed, but as relations hardened between blacks and whites, even positive events or comments attributed to the black population assumed a condescending and demeaning tone. The relationship of the white press became that of a parent to a child or a superior to an inferior. In May of 1930, the early tone is apparent. The editors of the *Las Vegas Age* newspaper wrote that "Las Vegas has had quite a large colony of people of the colored race" but that they have had an exceedingly small number of court appearances on felony charges.<sup>36</sup> The short article continued by stating that, "the proportion of serious crimes committed by them is much less than with the white race."<sup>37</sup> An article regarding the visit of William Pickens and letters to the editor written by blacks as the community fought for jobs received good coverage, were well placed and professionally penned. Later in the 1930s, the tone changed.

Upon close examination, it appeared the change in tone came along with an additional newspaper called *The Review Journal*. One of their earliest editorials, on November 20, 1934, recounts the story of a young colored man in Roanoke, Virginia, who murdered two women.<sup>38</sup> The newspaper recommended mob action and asked the question, "How would YOU feel if the same crime were committed here in Las Vegas?"<sup>39</sup> It seemed unnecessary and went far beyond reasonable sensibilities in its analyses, especially since it was common knowledge that blacks in Las Vegas were more law abiding than whites. The insulting manner continued over the years. On August 8, 1945, the same paper reported the request from the black community for improved infrastructure.<sup>40</sup> The headline read, "Westside Asks City Dads for Better Streets."<sup>41</sup> The community was not taken seriously by the media that was supposed to have been impartial.

Black life was not chronicled often, but when important issues were covered, the negative view gained the exposure. Elections in the black community

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<sup>36</sup> *A Good Record*, LAS VEGAS AGE, May 22, 1930, at 2.

<sup>37</sup> *Id.*

<sup>38</sup> *The Only Thing that Seems to Fit*, LAS VEGAS (NEV.) EVENING REV.-J., Nov. 20, 1934, at 6.

<sup>39</sup> *Id.*

<sup>40</sup> *Westside Asks City Dads For Better Streets*, LAS VEGAS (NEV.) EVENING REV.-J., Aug. 8, 1945, at 4.

<sup>41</sup> *Id.*

often posed the one way blacks shared in politics. That, coupled with the fact that the vote was often denied in the South, made Election Day an important affair among blacks. "Usual Westside Ruckus Marks City Election," screamed the headline that reported the election results in May of 1951.<sup>42</sup> The early community took politics seriously. The leaders, headed by Clarence Ray, formed a Voter's League that was revived in the mid 1950s.<sup>43</sup>

But before blacks could be resettled in the Historic Westside, those white settlers who remained in the McWilliams Townsite and did not move their homes across the tracks had to face the issue of sharing their previously all-white neighborhood. So the established residents put together a zoning petition that would prevent blacks from living in certain sections of the Historic Westside.<sup>44</sup> Blacks, with no place else to turn, fought back. According to a letter written to the city commissioners under the name of the Las Vegas Colored Progressive Club, blacks defiantly requested denial of the zoning petition.<sup>45</sup> The letter reminded city officials that blacks were true American citizens who had fought and died for the country.<sup>46</sup> Blacks won the round. The local paper reported that the city considered the zoning a violation of the United States Constitution.<sup>47</sup>

At this point, local blacks won a new home site, but faced defeat on all other fronts as they staged early civil rights scrimmages. On February 6, 1939, they introduced a civil rights bill in the Nevada State Assembly.<sup>48</sup> The effort failed. On the fourteenth, the Chairman of the Assembly Committee on Social Welfare, Henry S. Coleman, recommended that it "not pass because the same is not properly constructed and by reason of such faulty construction it would be inoperable and impractical."<sup>49</sup> What would have been Assembly Bill 88 called for "equal rights for all persons within the State of Nevada; to provide forfeitures for the denial thereof and to provide penalties for the violation thereof . . . ."<sup>50</sup> Fines up to \$1,000 and a maximum of 6 months of jail time were possible for offenders.<sup>51</sup> The disappointing results of the race and color bill, along with having to fight a zoning petition, led the displaced community leaders to try one more strategy before the decade ended. They approached the city with a quite limited human rights request. It fell short when compared to demands of the failed race and color bill.

<sup>42</sup> *Usual Westside Ruckus Marks City Election*, LAS VEGAS REV.- J., May 9, 1951, at 1.

<sup>43</sup> KAREN TACKETT, *McWILLIAMS TOWNSITE 1905-1980: A HISTORY OF WEST LAS VEGAS AND ITS RESIDENTS* (1980).

<sup>44</sup> Perry Bruce Kaufman, *The Best City of Them All: A History of Las Vegas, 1930-1960* (1974) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Univ. of Cal. Santa Barbara) (on file with Univ. of Nev. at Las Vegas, Lied Library, Dep't Special Collections).

<sup>45</sup> Letter to the Mayor and City Commission from Las Vegas Progressive Club, H. L. Wilson, Corresponding Secretary (n.d.) (on file in city clerk files, Las Vegas City Hall).

<sup>46</sup> *Id.*

<sup>47</sup> *Colored Residents Win Legal Battle*, LAS VEGAS (NEV.) EVENING REV.-J., Oct. 17, 1939, at 2.

<sup>48</sup> *JOURNAL OF THE ASSEMBLY OF THE 39TH SESSION OF THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF NEVADA* (1939).

<sup>49</sup> *Id.*

<sup>50</sup> A.B. 88, 1939 Leg., 39th Gen. Assem. (Nev. 1939).

<sup>51</sup> *Id.*

Again, Arthur McCants led the community in an attempt to gain a modicum of rights that would allow blacks some freedom of expression. In the fall of 1939, the NAACP chapter submitted a petition to the City Commission appealing for "an ordinance which would give all residents equal privileges on all property owned or leased by the city for amusement."<sup>52</sup> The city did not act upon the proposal.<sup>53</sup> Full civil rights was no longer the request. Instead, the NAACP wanted to use city swimming pools, playground equipment, and other leisure facilities that became important to urban areas at the turn of the century. Thus, the decade ended with blacks losing ground in their efforts to attain equal rights of any sort. The first community leaders gained recognition for their tireless work. Clarence Ray was constantly sought out for interviews and to record his memories. Arthur McCants was honored with a senior citizen housing complex that bears his name. The national office of the NAACP purchased that property but currently has it on the market for sale.

As the decade of the 1940s began, the World War II migration started because of jobs at Basic Magnesium Incorporation, a plant located near Las Vegas that processed magnesium for bombs and other war materials. The black population soared from 178 to 3,000. Among this group, a new leadership coalition emerged. Woodrow Wilson and Sarann Knight Preddy arrived in 1942, followed by Lubertha Johnson in 1943.<sup>54</sup> Preddy came with her family from Okmulgee, Oklahoma, and Johnson from Chicago after a short stay in Pasadena, California.<sup>55</sup> In 1945, J. David Hoggard came for a one-year military assignment, loved the atmosphere, the people, and the weather, and returned to live in 1949.<sup>56</sup> Jimmy Gay and his family migrated from Fordyce, Arkansas in 1946.<sup>57</sup> It is possible that Rev. Donald Clark and Rev. Henry Cooke joined the community at about that time as well. This group tackled the issues of public improvement; attaining a swimming pool, police harassment, and the acquisition of a federal housing complex. In 1949, another state civil rights bill was attempted, failed, and in 1954, using outside assistance from the NAACP, another local civil rights ordinance proved unsuccessful.<sup>58</sup>

Wilson, Preddy, and Johnson hailed from different parts of the country but converged on Las Vegas just as World War II drew Americans into battle. During the 1940s, racial discrimination raged in the U. S. along with the war in Europe and Asia. No place was exempt. Las Vegas tightened race-based restrictions, excluding blacks as the Historic Westside population increased.

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<sup>52</sup> Kaufman, *supra* note 44.

<sup>53</sup> *Id.*

<sup>54</sup> JAMIE COUGHTRY, *WOODROW WILSON: RACE, COMMUNITY AND POLITICS IN LAS VEGAS, 1940s-1980* (Oral History Program UNR, 1990); Claytee D. White, An Oral Interview with Sarann Preddy, in *Las Vegas, Nev. (Las Vegas Women in Gaming and Entertainment Oral History Project, 1998)*; Oral Interview of Lubertha Johnson (Elizabeth Nelson Patrick ed., *The Black Experience in Southern Nevada Project, Univ. of Nev. at Las Vegas, 1978*).

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Sarann Preddy, *supra* note 54.

<sup>56</sup> Claytee D. White, Interview with J. David Hoggard, Sr., in *Las Vegas, Nev. (Nov. 12, 1997)* (on deposit with Oral History Research Center, Univ. of Nev. at Las Vegas) [hereinafter Hoggard].

<sup>57</sup> Claytee D. White, Interview with Hazel Gay, in *Las Vegas, Nev. (Dec. 2, 1995)* (on deposit with Oral History Research Center, Univ. of Nev. at Las Vegas).

<sup>58</sup> MOEHRING, *supra* note 26, at 175.

When Pearl Bailey came to Las Vegas in 1941 to play at the military base, she remembered getting off the train on the main street and seeing "all of these places people were throwing dice and playing slot machines. . . . We went into these spots and played the machines. How ironic that a few years later 'people of race' were barred."<sup>59</sup> When Pearl Bailey returned in the late 1940s and played the Flamingo, she lived at Mrs. Harrison's boarding house in the Historic Westside.<sup>60</sup>

As the black community grew, so did the stereotypical views about blacks, sanctioning the increasingly discriminatory behavior by the majority population. Bailey and her entourage probably just made it under the wire that divided the period of harmony and that of discord because by 1943 the local paper reported that tolerance for integration had disintegrated to the point that whites were not allowed to mingle in entertainment establishments on the Historic Westside.<sup>61</sup> Police officers closed the Star Bar after they discovered that "the bar has been playing to a mixed trade, with [N]egroes and whites encouraged to congregate in the establishment promiscuously."<sup>62</sup> So not only were blacks required to leave the more lucrative business area in downtown, but white customers were not allowed to patronize black owned businesses forced to be located in the Historic Westside.

Still, blacks continued to push for justice and fair treatment through the NAACP, the most powerful entity in the black community. The strength of the organization came from its large enrollment, and in later years, from the branch's well integrated executive board that included some prominent white citizens. Simultaneously, the town that was labeled the "Mississippi of the West" can also credit later civil gains to a NAACP branch that enjoyed a marginal level of integration. The core leadership group of the 1940s and early 1950s lived in the Historic Westside neighborhood where residents had no paved streets, substandard housing, and no sidewalks. Blacks in the area approached the city for these much needed public improvements by first appealing for the paving of E Street.<sup>63</sup> The request tendered by Reverend Cooke was declined by Mayor Cragin because of the low assessed property values.<sup>64</sup>

The refusal did not stop the community from asking for additional improvements. In the following year, 1946, Rev. Cooke appealed to the mayor once more.<sup>65</sup> This time, the list increased with the verbal petition for fireplugs, and street lighting.<sup>66</sup> Again, the mayor refused, stating that low property values could not justify the expenditure.<sup>67</sup> In 1944, the city had begun a community improvement project of its own, quite different from the request of Rev. Cooke. As soon as Basic Magnesium ended production and shut down the

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<sup>59</sup> PEARL BAILEY, *THE RAW PEARL* 82-83 (Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. 1968).

<sup>60</sup> *Id.*

<sup>61</sup> *Bar on Westside Ordered Closed*, *LAS VEGAS REV.- J.*, July 1, 1943, at 3.

<sup>62</sup> *Id.*

<sup>63</sup> MOEHRING, *supra* note 26, at 178.

<sup>64</sup> *Id.*

<sup>65</sup> *Id.*

<sup>66</sup> *Id.*

<sup>67</sup> *Id.*

operation, Mayor Cragin bulldozed seventy-five living structures that did not meet the minimum building and fire codes.<sup>68</sup> In 1945, the following year, three hundred additional homes were razed.<sup>69</sup> The city fathers expected a reverse migration as jobs ended, but blacks stayed. First, the black community had been uprooted and relocated, then denied needed improvements for the safety and aesthetics of the area, and finally, homes though pitiable, were destroyed.

Gradually, the political leadership in the Las Vegas Valley changed courses and began to make some concessions to black citizens. In 1946, the Clark County School District contracted its first African American teacher, Mabel (Hoggard) Welch Wims.<sup>70</sup> In July 1947, a swimming pool opened on the Historic Westside.<sup>71</sup> In the final year of the decade, needy children began to receive milk, and plans were underway to establish a nursery school, install a public pay-phone, and complete a sewer system.<sup>72</sup>

In 1950, the community temporarily lost one of its business and social leaders when Sarann Knight Preddy left Las Vegas and moved to Hawthorne, Nevada, opened a small gaming establishment, and became the first black woman to hold a gaming license.<sup>73</sup> She assumed a community leadership role in Hawthorne as she had in Las Vegas, first by helping to organize a NAACP branch and then becoming the president of that local branch.<sup>74</sup>

The plans that the city fathers began to implement signaled that whites realized that blacks had created a community and did not plan to leave it. Thus, the well established middle class leadership group made one additional try at gaining simple human rights. Las Vegas black leaders combined with blacks from northern Nevada and opened negotiations for a state civil rights law. They engaged the help of the national NAACP and for the first time based their argument on economics. Lester B. Bailey, regional director of the NAACP, told members of the judiciary committee in Carson City that, "Nevada business was suffering by discrimination against certain races and minorities among tourists groups who must pass through the state without stopping."<sup>75</sup> This act was authored by George Rudiak, a Las Vegas Assemblyman who was a white member of the local NAACP branch.<sup>76</sup> It was believed that the bold stand of Rudiak for black civil rights ruined his political aspirations.<sup>77</sup> The Assembly refused to pass the bill.<sup>78</sup> The possibility of gaining equal treatment had failed again. The community faced yet another set back, but the migratory process infused the core leadership group with additional talent the following year.

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<sup>68</sup> *Id.*

<sup>69</sup> *Id.*

<sup>70</sup> Hoggard, *supra* note 56; GWEN WALKER & JUANITA WALKER, FROM THE KITCHEN TO THE BOARDROOM: NEVADA'S BLACK WOMEN 26 (2001).

<sup>71</sup> *Westside Swimming Pool Opens Friday*, LAS VEGAS REV.- J., July 31, 1949, at 5.

<sup>72</sup> *Report Progress in Solving Some of Westside Problems*, LAS VEGAS REV.- J., Mar. 22, 1949, at 4.

<sup>73</sup> Interview with Sarann Preddy, in Las Vegas, Nev. (Las Vegas Women in Gaming and Entertainment Oral History Project, June 5, 1997).

<sup>74</sup> *Id.*

<sup>75</sup> *Nevada Negroes Seeking Civil Rights Law*, LAS VEGAS REV.-J., Mar. 4, 1953, at 1.

<sup>76</sup> Hoggard, *supra* note 56.

<sup>77</sup> *Id.*

<sup>78</sup> *Id.*

The year 1954 signaled the beginning of another shift in leadership when a professional migration ensued. At the urging of Count Basie, Dr. Charles West, the first medical doctor and Alice Key, international dancer, community activist, and later Deputy Labor Commissioner of Nevada, migrated to Las Vegas.<sup>79</sup> The following year, Bob and Anna Bailey, along with Dr. James McMillan, the first black dentist, moved to the city almost simultaneous to the opening of the first integrated hotel casino, The Moulin Rouge.<sup>80</sup> The Baileys came as a result of positions at the famed resort.

As the black leadership changed at this point, Wilson, Preddy, Johnson, Gay, Hoggard, and Clark from the previous guard were not ready to step aside. They found ways to accommodate, integrate, and incorporate the talents of the professional newcomers. To do this was not easy, but within five years, the walls, that separated blacks from jobs on the Strip, came tumbling down. Sharing the tasks of leadership, as history will show, was almost nonexistent. The new leadership was almost completely in charge as they boldly and aggressively moved the Civil Rights agenda forward.

Responsibility for the next series of much-needed changes has been attributed to the new professional migrants. The more established middle class of the migration of the 1940s claims the credit as well. I argue that the entire community enabled these changes to occur and that outsiders were necessary because they held no allegiances, had established no roots or long term connections with either blacks or whites. James McMillan remembered that he was "elected president of the Las Vegas NAACP after attending only a few meetings."<sup>81</sup> McMillan reasoned that all of his talk about the severe segregation in Las Vegas caused the group to put his name forth.<sup>82</sup> It is also important to note that the new professionals cut deals and engaged the white community in dialog in quite confrontational ways that may have been impossible for those who were well established in the town.

As this combined leadership emerged, the population of the Historic Westside climbed to 16,000. The next step for the group was to revive the Nevada Voters League with Dr. West as president. Alice Key mounted a door-to-door voter registration drive and during the short life of the Moulin Rouge, she and Bob Bailey launched the first all-black television show in America.<sup>83</sup> Key interviewed African American entertainers who were performing in the city. West and Key also started the first African American newspaper.<sup>84</sup> Jimmy Gay, the sole representative of the 1940 leadership group, became the successful chairperson of the NAACP's annual fundraising affair, The Freedom Fund Banquet.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Interview with Alice Key, in Las Vegas, Nev. (Las Vegas Women in Gaming and Entertainment Oral History Project, Feb. 17, 1997).

<sup>80</sup> *Id.*; Interview with Anna Bailey, in Las Vegas, Nev. (Las Vegas Women in Gaming and Entertainment Oral History Project, 1998).

<sup>81</sup> JAMES B. McMILLAN, *FIGHTING BACK: A LIFE IN THE STRUGGLE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS* 79 (Univ. of Nev. Oral History Program, 1997).

<sup>82</sup> *Id.*

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Alice Key, *supra* note 79.

<sup>84</sup> *Id.*

<sup>85</sup> Oral Interview of James A. Gay III (Elizabeth Nelson Patrick ed., *The Black Experience in Southern Nevada Project*, Univ. of Nev. at Las Vegas 1978).

Dr. West encouraged his friend, Dr. James McMillan to join him in Las Vegas. During the months before McMillan's arrival, the Moulin Rouge Hotel Casino opened, bringing a brief hiatus to the campaign for racial harmony. The Moulin Rouge opened as the first integrated hotel casino that could rival those downtown as well as those on the Strip. More customers poured into the Historic Westside increasing revenues at the smaller night spots located on Jackson Street and in the surrounding business district.

Two events spurred the leadership toward the integration of the Strip. The 1959 NAACP Freedom Fund Dinner committee invited Tessa Hall Pittman to bring the keynote address. The speech "Now Is The Time" ignited the collective consciousness of the community.<sup>86</sup> Within a few months, NAACP national headquarters urged local chapters to smash segregation. On March 11, 1960, McMillan wrote a letter to Mayor Oran Gragson threatening a massive street protest if the gaming industry did not end discriminatory practices by March 26.<sup>87</sup> Active NAACP members organized the community through meetings at the various churches.<sup>88</sup> McMillan was never sure whether the march would be successful.<sup>89</sup> Bob Bailey remembered that McMillan was bombarded with harassing and threatening phone calls so he and other men from the community guarded McMillan's home during the two-week period.<sup>90</sup>

The march was supposed to have been a secret strategy, but McMillan's letter spoiled the intended surprise and caused some community leaders to question his motives.<sup>91</sup> The letter proved to be the saving grace that produced a visit to McMillan from Oscar Crozier, a representative of the Strip resort owners.<sup>92</sup> McMillan explained to Crozier that the goal of the march was to open economic opportunities to blacks.<sup>93</sup> This reasoning was accepted by the hotel owners who sent a verbal promise that the Strip and downtown would be opened to blacks as of six o'clock in the evening on Saturday, March 26, 1960.<sup>94</sup> The promise held, but was not revealed, according to the memories of McMillan.<sup>95</sup>

On that Saturday morning, Mayor Oran Gragson, Governor Grant Sawyer, Hank Greenspun, owner of the *Sun Newspaper* and life long member of the NAACP, and African American community leaders met at the Moulin Rouge to hash out and sign an agreement stating that blacks would indeed be allowed on the Strip in capacities other than custodial.<sup>96</sup> It is ironic that a few months later, the owner of the Moulin Rouge, Leo Fry, was rightly accused of charging blacks more per drink than white customers.

On Saturday evening, March 26, 1960, blacks tested the agreement and found that they were allowed to enter and participate in gaming activities with-

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<sup>86</sup> Hoggard, *supra* note 56.

<sup>87</sup> McMILLAN, *supra* note 81, at 94.

<sup>88</sup> *Id.*

<sup>89</sup> *Id.*

<sup>90</sup> *Id.*

<sup>91</sup> Hoggard, *supra* note 56.

<sup>92</sup> McMILLAN, *supra* note 81, at 95-99.

<sup>93</sup> *Id.*

<sup>94</sup> *Id.*

<sup>95</sup> *Id.*

<sup>96</sup> *Id.*

out incident. Only one or two establishments did not adhere to the new mandate on that evening.<sup>97</sup> The NAACP continued to ensure that the agreement held. In one of the chapter's Civil Rights reports, a complaint was filed with the Human Relation Commission of Las Vegas and the State Committee of Equal Rights of a "Negro visitor being bodily ejected from the Golden Gate Casino on July 4, 1961."<sup>98</sup> The report continues by stating that a public hearing was held, where the subpoenaed owners were present, but "refused to answer questions or testify."<sup>99</sup> The local chapter was vigilant, continuing the practice of monitoring the casinos even into the late 1970s. When Alice Key assumed the position as Executive Director of the NAACP chapter, she related that her duties included "counting heads" to ensure that blacks were indeed working in sufficient numbers. "I used to walk into a casino and count African American workers . . . . One day, Jean, a friend and I just went in for lunch."<sup>100</sup> Alice continued the account by stating that, "we passed by this security guard and Jean had stopped to look at something in the window. He saw me waiting for Jean and he said, 'A lot of 'em are out to lunch.'"<sup>101</sup>

Civil rights advocates in Las Vegas operated in a unique setting of a budding tourist mecca. Vast financial investments in lavish hotel casinos that catered to the wealthy visitors from across the country, but especially California, caused businessmen to seriously contemplate every civil rights decision. They weighed the impact on business of blacks as customers against the outcome of a massive march on the Strip. They evaluated the employment of blacks in visible, upwardly mobile jobs where they would encounter tourists, many transplanted southerners, who were apt to lose large sums of money to an African American employee. March 26, 1960 caused a paradigm shift as barriers between races showed the first cracks allowing blacks to enter the front doors of the pleasure palaces on the Las Vegas Strip.

The long civil rights struggle did not stage organized sit-ins or stage marches in the streets but the leadership style of the 1970s became bifurcated as lawyers waged legal battles for jobs, school integration and housing. Simultaneously, Ruby Duncan and her leadership cohort waged a different fight in the dynamic, well orchestrated movement for welfare rights.

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<sup>97</sup> Hoggard, *supra* note 56.

<sup>98</sup> Donald Clark Collection, T-68, Box 1 (on file with Univ. of Nev. at Las Vegas, Lied Library, Dep't Special Collections).

<sup>99</sup> *Id.*

<sup>100</sup> Interview with Alice Key, *supra* note 79.

<sup>101</sup> *Id.*