

Civil Rights in Cache Valley, Utah

Bob Parson, 1986

The 1960s was a decade of growing social awareness in the United States. The Civil Rights Movement and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s struggle for African-American equality awakened our collective conscience to the reality of social injustice. As students gradually eschewed the social apathy of previous decades, college campuses became a pivotal proving ground for achieving racial equality.

Although the spotlight of the national media focused primarily on the southern United States, discrimination respected no boundaries. It was as prevalent in Logan at Utah State University as it was at the University of Mississippi. Only twelve African-American students, most of them athletes, attended USU in 1961, and these comprised practically the entire African-American population of Cache Valley.ⁱ

African-American student athletes had only recently been recruited to play at USU, an occasion which brought protests from some alumni. "Let's give basketball back to the white boys...the practice of going out and recruiting colored boys and eliminating our boys is indefensible (sic) and should be abolished...they are no permanent good to the University and in most cases the University is no good to them."ⁱⁱⁱ

While the student body supported their "star" athletes and African-American students by electing Charles Belcher vice president of the Student Council in 1961,ⁱⁱⁱ the presence of African-American players created problems during some interstate contests held between USU and Brigham Young University, which had no African-American players. Furthermore, the historic view which the Mormon Church maintained until 1978 of denying African-Americans the priesthood, also created tension between the two teams. As a church owned institution, BYU athletic teams were often equated with the Church's doctrinal beliefs, viewed by many as racist.

These doctrinal beliefs, however, were not limited to BYU. In 1961, USU journalism professor John Stewart published his book *Mormonism and the Negro* which sought to justify and explain the LDS Church's exclusion of African Americans from the LDS Priesthood. Stewart's defense of Mormon theology resulted in several faculty members calling for his immediate "censor" by the Committee on Faculty Relations and Welfare. The committee refused, however, to "express an official judgment on the contents of the book and (could) not support the imposition of unwarranted restrictions ... on the freedom of expression of Faculty..."^{iv}

Inter-racial dating also heightened tensions. While President Daryl Chase simply stated that in his opinion the practice "very un-wise", he was receiving pressure from a number of sources to take a stronger stand against inter-racial dating. The University's Board of Trustees "seemed quite concerned about the rumors in Salt Lake..." according to Chase.^v

As Salt Lake City newspapers championed the civil rights of minority students, some alumni remained vehemently opposed to the "liberties" being taken by Utah State's African-American athletes. Wayne B. Garff, for instance, expressed his opinion that the president would "have plenty of backing in taking a strong stand on the racial issue. Many of us have not liked the unusual publicity brought to USU by its colored athletes. We think that the emphasis has been wrong in the press, and it has given rise to many misconceptions by our young people."

Regarding the issue of dating and inter-racial marriage, which was still illegal in Utah in 1961, Garff encouraged the president "to dismiss from the college any persons who will not uphold the moral standards of our institution and of our state and federal laws."^{vi}

Female students at the Triad dormitory were cautioned not to associate "with foreign students and colored students," according to reports in the student newspaper, *Student Life*. "You shouldn't go with these fellows," warned the head residents, "because they have different cultures and ideas than we do and they are fast talkers and can sweep you off your feet. You are young innocent girls. It is best to just stay away from them."

Businesses in Logan also practiced discrimination. Professor of entomology George E. Bohart wrote in November 1963 how he had his secretary make reservations at the Baugh Motel for guests of an Apiculture Conference held on campus. "At that time no mention was made of the one negro scientist in the group," Bohart wrote. "When the Branch Chief arrived for the conference two days early, he suggested that I call the motel to make sure the manager would accommodate a negro. When I did, Mr. Baugh said he would not. When I asked for his reason, he stated that negroes were personally repulsive to him. When I told him I wished to cancel all the reservations, he said he would like the other members of the group to stay at his motel and that he would help me find accommodations for the negro...I told him this would not be acceptable... Fortunately, I was able to change the reservations... in such a way that the negro scientist was not made aware that his color had created a problem. The reservations were changed to the Mitchell Motel... Subsequently I learned that the [Mitchell] accepts negroes only when they are scientists vouched for by the college people. Had I known this, I would have chosen a motel showing no racial discrimination."^{vii}

Some members of the USU student body began expressing disdain for bigotry and discrimination in 1965 through the publication of off-campus student newspapers.^{viii} President Chase also began making gradual overtures to improve relationships between all student factions on campus. In 1978, the Mormon Church extended the right of priesthood to African Americans, thus easing tensions between Church members and African-Americans, both nationally and on the USU campus. Finally, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 mandated equality by forcing all institutions of higher learning to comply or risk losing federal funds.

NOTES

ⁱ Daryl Chase, *Memo*, contained in Chase Papers, Utah State University Archives. Hereafter referred to as Chase.

ⁱⁱ Chase, *Letter from L.D. Naisbitt*, December 16, 1960.

ⁱⁱⁱ Buzzer, *USU Yearbook*, 1961.

^{iv} Chase, *Minutes of The Committee on Faculty Relationship and Welfare*, January 27, 1961.

^v Chase, *Memo*, January 25, 1961.

^{vi} Chase, *Letter from Wayne B. Garff*, February 6, 1961.

^{vii} Chase, Letter from George E. Bohart to M.R. Merrill, April 14, 1964.

^{viii} See, Nova, April 5, 1965 and Wasatch Front 1970. 1971