

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."