Civil Rights Movement: Where Has Peoria Been?

By Mimi Mcintosh

Where has Peoria been during the past 20 years on the integration issue?

Peoria has been marching in the streets, in the courts, in jail a time or two, sitting and standing behind the School Board, holding sit-ins, forming committees, calming hot tempers and quieting explosive street confrontations.

The "separate but equal" doctrine was struck down by the Supreme Court in 1954 and the decision to integrate schools "with all deliberate speed" was handed down in 1963. The civil rights movement did not really begin to roll until the early 1960's in Peoria.

CIVIL RIGHTS leader John Gwinn, now president of the NAACP, was at the forefront of all civil rights action in Peoria from the start, and he hasn't let up in 14 years. The mood of the nation and the frustrations of the black way of life and what to do about it first began to manifest itself in Peoria in 1963. In a column in the Peoria Register, then the official publication of the Catholic Register, the Rev. Fr. R. G. Peters wrote in July, 1963:

"Can we really blame the Negro for dropping out of high school when he knows the diploma is going to make no difference in his getting a job? An we honestly fail to see the plight of the Negro in college who knows that even with a degree, he'll have a hard time getting a job, then perhaps he should try to get a broom?"

Jobs, or the lack of them, were the initial thrust of the civil rights movement in Peoria. A few pickets and boycotts were reported as early as 1963, but the local NAACP really began its concentrated effort to open Peoria up to blacks in 1967.

That year blacks picketed the Central Illinois Light Co. for more than a month before an agreement was signed that the utility company would make job opportunities available to blacks and to spearhead a drive among other employers in the city to provide equal employment opportunities. The agreement came only after a few arrests for disorderly conduct, speeches, rallies, a sit-in and marches.

Also in the summer of '67, a boycott of the city bus company brought about the hiring of the city's first two black bus drivers. Sit-ins Demons like this one on Nov. 7, 1967, brought about integration of Peoria public schools. Here black and white protesters move north on Adams at Fayette street on their way to the Peoria Schools Administration Building to demand integration.

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