

Civil Rights Movement: Where Has Peoria Been?

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 hard and stern-faced behind the School Board table, holding sit-ins, forming committees, calming hot tempers and quieting explosive street confrontations.

Though 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 1955, the civil rights movement did not really begin to roll until the early 1960s in Peoria.

CIVIL RIGHTS leader John Gwynn, now local president of the NAACP, was at the fore 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 Roman Catholic diocese of Peoria, Msgr. 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? or 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 much above merely pushing 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 1959, but the local NAACP really began a concentrated

—By Mimi McLintock

effort to open Peoria up to blacks in 1963.

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 shop-in and marches.

Also in the summer of '63, a boycott on the city bus company brought about the hiring of the city's first two black bus drivers. Sit-ins

DEMONSTRATIONS like this 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.

were held at the Peoria Water Works to protest that none of the firm's employes were black. After 21 days of protest the Water Works hired two blacks and the picketing stopped.

As momentum built, the NAACP (oftentimes in the person of teen-agers of the group's youth branch) picketed the Peoria Board of Realtors and several area realtors for housing discrimination, Brown's, (then Brown's Home and Auto), and an impromptu demonstration in front of a barbershop in 1964 resulted in arrests, court cases and marches.

In more recent history, the NAACP clashed with police in August 1971, during picketing outside the old Montgomery Ward store in downtown Peoria over the company's firing practices.

Though the Supreme Court handed down its initial school desegregation decisions in 1955, Peoria schools did not