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17 Peo - Negro

# Story Of A Failure... Why Didn't Our Negroes Answer?

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This is the story of a newspaper investigation which failed.

Not often do newspapers print their own failures, but this particular failure may also be the failure of a lot of other people.

Simply and briefly the project was an attempt to find out, "What Negroes Can Do to Help Themselves in Peoria."

It was not to be an over-ambitious survey. About 70 names were selected to receive letters asking help on the study. The

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thought was that if enough answered there would be a good enough selection of ideas to set up some guideposts for the future.

There were just four replies.

One was from a college professor. Another was from a police officer. A third was from a minister, and the fourth was from a teacher at a state institution.

Considering the fact that the letters asking help were sent to members of the Negro segment of Peoria's population, the lack of response was a downright disappointment.

**WHY DID** a minority group,

which for almost a hundred years has been denied rights granted it by the United States Constitution and affirmed by the Emancipation Proclamation, and again by Supreme Court decisions, decline to raise its voice when given an opportunity to do so?

Why?

The only other situation which paralleled this in this reporter's experience was when an entire town seemed to clam up on the murder of a young wife a few years ago.

Why? . . . We finally put the question to a young student-librarian, who had received one of the letters.

"Why?" she said rather hesitatingly. "Well, two or three of the people with whom I have talked don't think it would do any good, so they are not going to answer your letter."

Could this be the reason? Is there such a feeling of bitter hopelessness among Peoria Negroes that they refuse to try when handed an opportunity to express themselves?

One of the four replies would seem to give credence to this premise. It asked at one point, "How can a person continue to fight back when he is cornered in every direction?"

This, from a person with a

master's degree in clinical psychology, is quite a shocker. The remainder of his letter is a plea that white people give up their stereotypes of the Negro, a cry for equal job opportunity, and a petition that colored people be treated as human beings and part of a growing community.

**FIRST OF ALL**, it's an eye-opener, when a citizen of this city feels he has to, "fight back."

A veteran police officer told me kindly, "Don't be impatient with him. I've been around some time. After all you must remember that our people have come up from slavery. They

have also found out that sometimes to open their mouths or write a letter only causes them more trouble."

And it was this man who had to point out to the reporter that perhaps the failure of such a survey might indeed be a story in itself.

Another, who must be considered a Negro leader in this city, said, "Maybe you went at this thing the wrong way. Remember, we don't ask any kind of special treatment. We would just like to have an even break, an even opportunity for our youngsters. If they don't make it after that, it is our fault . . . or their fault."

"But we think they do deserve a fair crack at education, religion, employment, housing, recreation . . . in short, a chance to become members of the community . . . not just of the Negro community."

The police officer said that he did think things have been better for his people, even in the last 10 years.

It reminded me of an acquaintance of mine who has a favorite gimmick when confronted by a person who says, "I don't like Negroes . . . or Jews . . . or Catholics."

He says simply, "Name six!" Usually the bigot can't do it.