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

By BILL CONNER
Staff Writer

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 78 names were selected to receive letters asking help on the study. The thought was that if enough answered there would be a good enough selection of ideas to set up some guidelines 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 make a difference?

"Why?" the reader might ask, "Why did a Negro answer it?"

Why? The only other situation parallel to that in this letter's experience was when an entire town seemed to come up on the murder of a young girl a few years ago.

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

"Why?" she said rather hesitatingly, "Well, two out of three of the people I know have problems. I can'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 hopelessness among Negroes that they refuse to try when hands are extended to them?

One of the four replies was from a Negro who wrote: "The more you write things like this, the more they are going 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.

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

Another, who must be considered a Negro leader in this city, said, "Maybe you went a little out of the way wrong. Remember, 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 all, that 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 didn't 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 gymnastic 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.