

MARCH

For African-Americans in St. Louis, a long march for justice



AUGUST 31, 2014 12:00 AM • BY TIM O'NEIL

In May 1942, as America charged into World War II, an instructor at Booker T. Washington Technical, the city's vocational high school for blacks, wrote this letter to the Post-Dispatch:

"We'd like to help win the war because we are Americans too. We can't fight, but we can work. Who'll give us the chance?"

Despite the peril of powerful enemies across both oceans, America's armed forces were segregated by race, with blacks consigned largely to support roles. As industries forged the world's mightiest war machine, blacks often were relegated to maintenance jobs, or not hired at all.

On Aug. 14, 1942 — three months after Washington Tech coordinator Frank B. Wilson penned his letter — more than 9,000 people jammed old Municipal (later Kiel) Auditorium downtown for a rally to demand more jobs for blacks at defense plants. The event helped launch the modern civil-rights movement in St. Louis.

At the funeral Monday for Michael Brown, who was shot to death Aug. 9 by a Ferguson police officer, some of the 4,500 mourners were old enough to remember the jobs rally at Kiel. Many more remembered the lengthy protests and sit-ins at Jefferson Bank & Trust Co. in 1963 — the Big Event in the local movement.

"We have been through disturbing times," said John A. Wright, an author of several books on black history in St. Louis and a 1957 graduate of Sumner High School. "Things are a hell of a lot better than when I was a kid. But there is so much pent-up feeling and history. You never know what will make it explode."

IMPROVEMENTS SLOW IN COMING

Theodore McNeal, a local organizer for the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (and later Missouri's first black state senator), spoke at the Kiel Auditorium rally.

"We resent the Jim Crow setup in the armed forces and war industry, and treatment branding us as second-class citizens," McNeal told the crowd.

Two weeks after the rally, McNeal led 400 people on a march to Carter Carburetor Corp., 2840 North Spring Avenue at North Grand Boulevard, which made artillery-shell fuses and carburetors for military vehicles. "Fight the Axis — Don't fight us," said one protest sign.

By war's end, job opportunities had improved. President Harry Truman integrated the armed forces in 1948.

But average family income for blacks in St. Louis that year were just over half that of white families — \$38 per week compared to \$64. Half of employed blacks were service workers, such as building cleaners or domestics. Five percent were in professions. Only four percent of city police officers were black.

The city's roughly 150,000 black residents were crowded into 600 blocks, mostly from downtown west to Kingshighway, and from Delmar Boulevard north to St. Louis Avenue. Many lived in slums of the old Mill Creek Valley west of Union Station. Deaths by tuberculosis were five times higher among blacks than whites.

Restrictive covenants on real-estate deeds kept blacks bottled up. And from 1940 to 1960, the black population in St. Louis and St. Louis County nearly doubled, to 233,389 people, during the last great migration from the Deep South. But only 20,000 blacks lived in the county.

Tension between police and black residents is of long standing. In 1942, a St. Louis Circuit Court grand jury investigated 10 allegations of police brutality, nine of the cases involving blacks. No formal action was taken.

On Christmas night 1947, police were pelted with bottles and ashtrays outside the Silver Slipper tavern, 2817 Easton Avenue (now Martin Luther King Drive) after two officers shot and killed a patron, James Taylor, 25. About 150 rioters confronted police reinforcements. Police said Taylor fired first.

Strife wasn't limited to white officers and black victims. In September 1962, three nights of rioting broke out in the all-black north St. Louis County community of Kinloch after officer Israel Mason shot and killed Donnell Dortch, 22, while serving a court summons. Both Mason, 74, and Dortch were black.

But most public protests have been over civil rights, jobs and poverty.

JIM CROW, WAR JOBS DRIVE MIGRATION

Until the end of the 19th century, the St. Louis-area's African-American population was relatively small. In 1900, blacks made up 6 percent of the city and less than 1 percent of the county. But violent racism in the Deep South boosted migration, which accelerated as northern factories hummed during World War I.

Soon there was trouble. Industrialists in East St. Louis countered strikes by hiring replacement workers, both white and black. Embittered union leaders remembered black faces.

On the night of July 1, 1917, shots were fired into black homes from a speeding Ford. Another approaching Ford was met with a volley by black men, killing the two police officers inside. They were investigating the first shooting.

Their deaths sparked a vicious reaction the next day by whites, who rampaged through black neighborhoods. The official death count was 39 blacks and nine whites,



but the actual count probably was closer to 100.

St. Louis avoided the violence and opened shelters for African-Americans who fled across the bridges, but had a public shame of its own.

Real-estate interests had been pressing to keep black residents in black neighborhoods. In 1916, city voters adopted by a 3-to-1 margin a rule preventing blacks or whites from moving onto blocks where fewer than 75 percent of residents were of their own race.

The U.S. Supreme Court threw out the restrictions one year later, but covenants achieving the same purpose soon found their way onto private property-sale deeds.

They were effective until 1948, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled unenforceable the covenant for a house at 4600 Labadie Avenue. The nationally significant decision pitted J.D. and Ethel Shelley, a black couple who bought the house, and Louis and Fern Kraemer, white neighbors who tried to keep them out.

By then, the notion of equality was knocking at public places. Shortly after City Hall integrated its diner in 1944, black women sat down at whites-only lunch counters in downtown department stores. They were refused service. Their effort received scant notice in local newspapers.

On June 21, 1949, several hundred whites rioted after the city integrated the swimming pool in Fairground Park. More than a dozen people were injured. It took 400 police officers 12 hours to restore order.

A decade later, a more determined round of sit-ins took place at Pope's Cafeteria downtown, the Woolworth's in midtown and the Howard Johnson's at 3501 North Kingshighway. Many restaurants had conceded by 1961, when the Board of Aldermen banned discrimination in public places.

In 1947, Catholic Archbishop Joseph Ritter integrated Catholic schools and squelched a wave of parent protests with the blunt threat of excommunication. Eight years later, the city public schools quietly honored the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark school-integration case, although housing patterns kept most schools effectively black or white.

JEFFERSON BANK PROTESTS

On Aug. 30, 1963, singing protesters entered the lobby of Jefferson Bank, which had plenty of black customers but only two black employees. Managers of the bank, at 2600 Washington Avenue, said they wouldn't be threatened.

"They need to be forced into doing the right thing," said Robert Curtis, chairman of the local Committee (later Congress) of Racial Equality, or CORE.

Protests and arrests continued for weeks. In October, protesters moved to the old City Jail and

A victim of white rioting in East St. Louis on July 2, 1917. (Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, Bowen Archives)



A blood-stained man sits in the middle of Kossuth Avenue after suffering a beating from a mob who chased him through Fairground Park on June 21, 1949, the day the swimming pool in the park was integrated. The men in hats are detectives who arrived to protect the man. Several hundred whites rioted after the city integrated the pool. More than a dozen people were injured. It took 400 police officers 12 hours to restore order. Photo by St. Louis Post-Dispatch

serenaded their locked-up leaders, including William L. Clay, alderman and future congressman; Raymond Howard and Louis Ford, future state legislators; and Norman Seay, longtime public administrator.

That protest was inspired in part by sit-ins across the Mississippi River at First National Bank, at Missouri and Collinsville avenues in East St. Louis, where protesters marched into the lobby on Aug. 15 and locked arms. The bank agreed to hire 20 black clerks.

Then there was a time noteworthy for what didn't happen. After the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tenn., on April 4, 1968, riots broke out in many American cities, but not St. Louis.

Here, a firebomb was thrown at a grocery near Kingshighway and Page Avenue, but it didn't ignite. Local civil-rights leaders, gray-haired veterans and agitated young Turks, met in tense sessions and forged agreement for a peaceful march in response to King's death. By the time it reached Forest Park, more than 30,000 people were in the street.

Black migration to the suburbs took time. In 1970, only 46,000 of St. Louis County's 902,000 residents were black. By 2000, the number had quadrupled to 193,300. Ferguson, 75 percent white in 1990, had become 67 percent black by 2010.

Of protests in recent years, the biggest was on July 12, 1999, when 300 people blocked Interstate 70 at Goodfellow Boulevard to demand more highway contracts and jobs for blacks.

Among those arrested on I-70 was the Rev. Al Sharpton, a guest speaker at Monday's funeral for Michael Brown. Decrying violence during some nights of protests in Ferguson, Sharpton said, "Michael Brown does not want to be remembered for a riot."



Protesters demonstrate against job discrimination at Jefferson Bank and Trust Co. at Jefferson Avenue and Washington Boulevard on Oct. 10, 1963. That day's demonstration by physicians and business professionals was peaceful and brief, lasting about 40 minutes. The protests at Jefferson Bank persuaded many companies to hire and promote more African-Americans.