

A REPORT ON LAST SUMMER'S WORKSHOP
IN THE NATION'S CAPITAL, IS

STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
OF WISCONSIN
816 State Street
Madison, Wisconsin 53706

Project: Brotherhood

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WHEN THE twenty-two members of the 1949 Interracial Workshop¹ arrived in Washington last July 1, they found themselves involved at once in tension. A near race riot had occurred at the swimming pool in the Anacostia Park area of the District two days before, and Secretary of the Interior Krug, who supervises this park, had ordered the pool closed.

What could a group of young people, rather unfamiliar with the Washington scene, contribute toward the solution of this problem in only one month's stay in the nation's capital?

We Learn the Facts

Our group spent five or six days during the first part of July gathering all the facts necessary on the pool situation.

The outbreak of violence took place at the Anacostia pool, which is under the control of the Interior Department. Newspapers garbled reports of what happened, according to our careful investigations. They claimed that fifty Negro youths, spurred on by the Young Progressives of America, had overrun the pool, causing a mob to gather and racial clashes to occur. YPA members were supposed to have toured the Negro area near the park urging Negroes to use the pool.

Our inquiries disclosed that a non-political, but sincerely militant, group known as the Consolidated Parents Group had initiated action at the pool. For years liberals in Washington had said something needed to be done about segregation in the swimming pools. What good did the non-segregation policy of the Department of the Interior do if it was not put to the test?

The Consolidated Parents Group, we learned, had sent a limited number of Negro youth to the Anacostia pool on successive days in June. The first day only two boys went; the second day six, the third day ten; the fourth and final day about sixteen. There had been some threats by white youths against Negro swimmers from the first day, but on the fourth day this opposition was clearly organized. Young Progressives had made the strategic mistake of passing out leaflets on the fourth day. This had caused even a larger crowd to gather than would otherwise have been the case. Fighting broke out, and police quelled the disorder, arresting only a handful of the participants. Secretary Krug issued his order closing the Anacostia pool. It is interesting to note that McKinley pool, also under the control of the Department of the Interior, was simultaneously visited by Negroes. No violence broke out here, but there was a very marked tendency during the summer for white swimmers to go elsewhere. Both the McKinley and Anacostia Park areas have a large Negro population.

¹ Sponsored jointly by the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Congress Of Racial Equality and the permanent Washington Interracial Workshop.

We Go Into Action

The next step of the campaign was obvious. On the one hand we must urge groups and individuals from all parts of the country to send letters and telegrams to Secretary Krug asking for a reopening of the pool on an interracial basis; and second, we must offer a practical plan whereby the pool could be opened without violence occurring. Hundreds of letters and telegrams did pour into the Department of the Interior due to our efforts. Even more important, we were responsible for working out a plan which had to be considered seriously by all concerned parties. More than twenty-five Washington organizations supported the plan as it was drawn up and submitted both to the Recreation Board and to the Department of the Interior. The newspapers gave good notice to the plan. The plan called for a limited number of police to be on duty, for interracial life guards, for sympathetic personnel in the bath house prepared to deal nonviolently with any threat of violence, for health precautions for all swimmers, for limitation on hours the pool was to be open during the first two weeks, and for only younger boys and girls to be admitted during a two-week transition period.

The most difficult task we had was finding qualified white life-guards who were sympathetic to the cause we represented. It was much less difficult to locate Negroes. At least fifty individuals and organizations were seen or called in a three- or four-day period for help on this task. In order to gain some support for the interracial idea in the Anacostia area, some of our Workshoppers spent several days simply contacting churches and civic organizations there. This did not meet with notable success, although it was enlightening to talk with those whose racial prejudices went very

deep. Two Workshoppers circulated a petition among the boys and girls of Anacostia which read: "We the boys and girls of the Anacostia area are willing to swim together regardless of the color of our skins. We are anxious to use the pool as soon as possible, and we pledge our cooperation in maintaining orderliness at the Anacostia pool when it reopens." In two days of canvassing many signatures were obtained. The police intervened in the signature collecting campaign at one point. But our Workshoppers took this opportunity to talk with the police on their responsibilities in meeting a crisis such as arose at Anacostia. The campaign continued.

The Results

Anacostia pool did not open as a result of our work, but we made it more possible for the pool to be unsegregated next year. Dr. E. B. Henderson, the recreation director for the Negro schools in Washington, wrote in a widely syndicated column: "Too much credit cannot be given to the work being done in Washington by the Interracial Workshop, sponsored by the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Congress of Racial Equality, in clearing the way for a broader recreation program for all the citizens of Washington. The Workshop has devised a plan whereby swimming in the controversial area of public pools might come on an interracial basis with the least degree of friction. . . ." Secretary Krug wrote us, ". . . I am in complete concurrence with the basic objectives of your proposal and believe that they can be attained. . . . I again wish to express my appreciation for the cooperation which you are extending to this Department in this difficult situation and commend the Interracial Workshop for the splendid effort it is making to bring about harmonious relationships between the white and Negro citizens of the National Capital."

But all of the above does not tell the whole story. It doesn't tell about Don Coan's being called a "damn Communist" and being given a punch in the jaw when an interracial group visited one of the so-called white pools on an investigation project. It doesn't tell of Dick Talbert's being threatened with a beating by a tough Anacostia resident as he was trying to gather information. It doesn't tell of Joffre Stewart's investigation of violence involving the near-drowning of a Negro boy in the McKinley pool. It doesn't tell of the many nights we worked till almost morning putting out essential mailing during the campaign. But it does indicate the scope of what we tried to do—and with some success.

But this was only one of our projects. While eight or ten of our Workshoppers were giving full time to the crisis at the swimming pools, another group equally as large was giving major attention to the restaurant facilities at the Greyhound bus terminal. We learned that almost universally Negroes are refused service in any eating places outside the Negro section of the city. Notable exceptions are the Union Station, the YWCA cafeteria, and the government cafeterias.

The Greyhound Campaign

A campaign to change the policy at the Greyhound had been in progress for more than a year and a half, but had met with little success, and was now lagging. We joined forces with those Washingtonians who were still at work on Greyhound, and on the third day after we arrived in the nation's capital, participated in a sit-down at the Greyhound restaurant lasting for two and a half hours, late Sunday afternoon. Although we had only about thirty-five in our total group, monopolizing less than half the available seats, the sit-down was very effective. Our

group drifted in by twos and threes over a half-hour period, spreading ourselves out. Management could not tell which of the white persons coming into the restaurant were members of our group, and which were ordinary travelers. Therefore, thinking we were bent on filling every seat, whenever a customer vacated a table, thus obviously not being part of our group, all the chairs were turned upside down and set on the table. This meant business was virtually at a standstill while we stayed in the restaurant. Although attention was called to our presence by this tactic, no unpleasant incidents occurred apart from a remark or two by observers. One sailor wanted to start a fight. But another sailor invited a Negro member of our group to join him at his table. The police stood by, but made no move to interfere.

New interest in Greyhound was aroused. We decided to call a public strategy meeting for all those interested in the campaign. We allowed only a few days for the promotion of this meeting, but almost a hundred key Washington people attended. Here it was decided that if we could not reach some agreement with management by a week hence, we would begin a full-time sit-down. We felt we could get the recruits for such a campaign, and that if all participants remained steadfastly non-violent throughout, we could not fail to win a change of policy. We actually had already arranged a time schedule and had lined up many local Washingtonians to participate in this demonstration of indefinite duration, when to our surprise and joy we were successful in our negotiations with management.

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We Go to the Theatre

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One other project emerged toward the end of our Workshop which took considerable time. This concerned the segregation pattern of Washington theaters. No Negro may attend a theater in the downtown section of Washington. He may not even sit in the balcony. We thought a strategic moment to attack this evil would be when "Home of the Brave," a film with an interracial theme, came to one of the theaters. We stirred up interest in the issue by drafting an open letter to the New York owner of the theater where the movie was to be shown, and got the leading liberal organizations of Washington to join us in signing it. We then distributed leaflets outside the theater in which we urged the public to see the film, but to bring to the attention of management the contradiction between its segregation policy and the theme of the movie. One policeman threatened to make an arrest during the leafleteering, but did not follow through on this after checking with headquarters. Our Workshop closed before this project was completed, but we laid the foundation for what was done subsequently in the way of a standing interracial line before the ticket window, making clear to patrons that the policy of the theater was discriminatory, but not blocking the entrance. This technique received excellent response from the patrons, many refusing to go in.

Although the life of the Workshop is built around the projects, there is much more which could be told. The educational meetings, where nonviolence is discussed, and where leaders in various walks of life present vividly their experience in the struggle for a greater justice, are of great importance. Dr. Sushila Nayar of India, George L. P. Weaver of the

CIO, Senator Hubert Humphrey, NAACP and Urban League leaders are some of those who met with us. The strategy discussions in our own group, although taking too much time very often, are an essential part of the learning process for the Workshopper. And we have lots of fun, too—picnics, swimming outings (apart from projects) and parties. Finally there are the bull sessions, getting to know what makes others tick, being drawn close to other Workshoppers by going through trying experiences together—all these add up to a deep sense of fellowship. Workshoppers leave the project tired from the long hours and strenuous work, but it is not surprising that we have received many letters saying: "The Workshop was the most important experience yet in my young life."

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