

## Race in the Land of Lincoln

JERRY DeMUTH

TO REACH the depressed southern region of Illinois, you travel down U.S. highway 51, a narrow, twisting concrete band with jagged black lines filling its many cracks. The towns—Cobden, Anna, Jonesboro, Millcreek, Elco, Tamms, Sandusky, Unity, Cache, Beech Ridge—were once prosperous coal mining centers. But now most of the mines are closed—and no industry is coming into the area. The people leave, go north to St. Louis, Chicago, Detroit and other big cities, or stay, occasionally working at odd jobs, mostly collecting relief.

Along the highway is Future City, which shows its face to the traveler as a row of strip clubs. Late in the fall, when the geese are flying south, the birds stop nearby and hunters flock to the area to bring down the game as fast as they can fire their guns, until their quota is filled. At night, their pockets bulging with big city money, the hunters fill the strip clubs to gamble in the back rooms and to watch the girls, many of whom come down for the season from Calumet City outside Chicago. At this time the area, or at least the area's syndicate boys, finds a brief prosperity. But the prosperity never reaches back of the highway—to the Negro Community, to those who call Future City rather "The City Without a Future."

Three miles further down the road, set between the junction of the Ohio and Mississippi, is Cairo, pronounced as in Karo of syrup fame. Now a town of 9,300, some 3,500 Negroes, Cairo's former prosperity and greater size are evident in its large business district, which is now mostly empty stores fronted by vacant parking lots. A luggage factory was going to open a plant here in fall of 1961, but the town leaders wanted a dual wage scale—one for whites, a lower one for Negroes. The plant didn't come.

Life for a Negro here is little different from life in Future City. The women can get jobs as maids; the men—"All we can get is boys' jobs at boys' wages," a man explains. Most jobs are closed to Negroes, even jobs for the city and county: "No nigger will ever work for the post office as long as I'm postmaster," the Cairo postmaster stated shortly after he took over. Though Negroes had been mail carriers, one cannot find any

Negroes working for the post office now, except as janitors. Yet these barriers of segregation and discrimination are being assaulted as many Negroes from the area, assisted by others and, with an education which surpasses the mayor's fifth-grade schooling, work for their full human rights.

"MARY was stabbed last night." These were the first words I heard when I went to see a college friend and SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) field worker, Jim Peake, while I was passing through Carbondale, site of Southern Illinois University and the only growing town in southern Illinois.

"It was in front of Mack's," my friend continued. Mack's Bar B-Q was the only restaurant that had not integrated since the sit-ins began one week before. "I'm not prejudiced," said Mack's manager James Cox, who once turned a fire hose on demonstrators. "I got forty-seven Negroes working for me in my laundry. But they're not like you." (A couple of weeks later, however, those forty-seven were no longer working in the laundry; they were on strike. And though Cox was without Negroes in his laundry, there were Negroes in his restaurant. Mack's had finally integrated.)

"There was a mob outside and when we left they followed us to our cars," I was told. "Mary was in the rear seeing to it that everyone was getting in the cars when this guy who was at the head of the mob ran up from behind and stabbed her." Jim turned on the radio. A singing station break had just ended. We listened during the newscast for any mention of Cairo and so did everyone else in the room. Even though not all were directly connected with the movement, they were still very much concerned. It was a part of their lives, their lives in the Land of Lincoln, their lives in the Land of the Free.

Then the phone rang. It was the Associated Press. "Yes, a girl was stabbed last night," Jim explained. "Mary McCullom. She's a field representative for SNCC. . . . Well, if you don't believe me, I can show you the wound myself. I'll be at the AME Church in Cairo at 12:30. You have a reporter there and I'll show him the wound."

Jim had left his car in Cairo and I drove him those fifty-five miles through the "Little Egypt" section of the state, a section that tried to secede from the Union

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and join the South in the Civil War. "Up ahead on the right is the Roller Bowl," Jim said. "We're starting to work on that now. Thistlewood wants ten dollars admission from us." William Thistlewood, the skating rink owner had claimed that because of his insurance policy he had to charge "inexperienced" skaters ten dollars. He said that once a person proved his ability, he would refund the extra nine-fifty.

In the outskirts of Cairo itself small restaurants and drive-ins dotted the sides of the highway, and soon small homes filled the empty areas between the cafes. We passed Mack's and the swimming pool and entered the main section of the town. We turned right on 17th street—a block of small homes, many with siding, and then blocks of old, weathered, frame houses, some one story, others two or three, but all browned from decades of exposure. They looked as though they had never been painted.

I parked the car on 17th street, half a block from the main street. We were at Ward's Chapel, the AME Church which was headquarters for the Cairo Nonviolent Freedom Committee. Reverend Blaine Ramsey, Jr., the pastor and Cairo NAACP president, was part of the backbone of the integration movement.

"People in the North are dissatisfied with hypocrisy and pseudo-democracy," Reverend Ramsey has claimed. "The demonstrations have pushed the problems into the open. Negroes here have learned the techniques and gained the courage to carry through." Pushing into the open the problems Negroes have to face in Cairo disrupts the exploitive and degrading white rule. And the whites don't like to be nudged out of their comfortable position.

"Racial intolerance is not needed in Cairo," Peyton Berbling, the president of the Cairo Chamber of Commerce, said in reference to the movement. "The ill-advised and militant activities of this small integrationist group . . . and the ill-will and racial intolerance they have fomented and encouraged will be with us a long time."

AFTER A FEW hours at the old, dark red brick church, I left Jim and Cairo for other commitments. When I returned, four weeks later, the town may have looked the same, but the feeling was different. The Negro community was not only supporting the movement, but



becoming deeply involved in it. And the teenagers in the movement had more enthusiasm and determination.

All the restaurants were now integrated and they were not going to stop at this point. The Roller Bowl and swimming pool were going to be next. "Freedom. Give us freedom." The words, sung to the tune of *Day-O*, penetrated the neighborhood: "Freedom's coming and it won't be long."

About twenty youths were gathered in the church basement, discussing plans for the evening demonstration. After a lull over the weekend, a period of relaxation from the pressures of the preceding week's activities, the movement was again displaying its energy as it began a new week—morning and evening meetings and nonviolent workshops, afternoon and night demonstrations at the swimming pool and Roller Bowl.

More persons drifted into the building as leaders tried to find enough cars. Almost an hour after the first persons had arrived at the church, a line of six cars pulled away, slowly drove to highway 51 and then carefully made its way northward to the Roller Bowl, some four miles away.

Three state police cars, one of them unmarked, were parked at the intersection about a thousand feet south of the rink. Would they be needed? And if needed, would they help? I looked toward the left, to the other side of the road. Three rows of cars completely filled the parking lot in front of T-Wood's Roller Bowl and another two rows filled the side lot. More cars filled the lot at a nearby restaurant. Following the car in front, we went into the drive. Suddenly people were all around, yelling, screaming, making faces, waving arms, shaking fists.

"We don't want no niggers here." "Get outa here." "Keep going"—seventy-five angry whites and more inside. The car in front rolled onto the drive of the theater next door and we followed. The drive led back to the highway and we turned back south, to find a place to park and discuss plans. The state police were no longer there. All three cars had disappeared. After meeting at a nearby train station, we decided to park our cars at the restaurant at the intersection. From there we walked in single file to the Roller Bowl.

The mob was inside now, meeting with the others, and a "Closed" sign was on the door. Thistlewood and the sheriff were there to explain that the Roller Bowl was closed for a private meeting. The rink frequently was used for private meetings and closed to the public. At other times it was closed without explanation or advance warning. If word did go out via some grapevine, it was an all-white grapevine.

We left in low spirits, but the next morning spirits were higher than ever. Illinois Attorney General William G. Clark had said the swimming pool was public: The pool had been built with WPA funds and its charter declared it was "for the physical, mental and moral im-

provement of the citizens of Cairo and vicinity." Attorney General Clark had cited the charter as the basis for his opinion.

"That's just the Attorney General's opinion," Cairo Police Chief Jones, falling back on his fifth-grade education, commented. "He's entitled to his opinion just as I'm entitled to mine and you're entitled to yours."

The integration of the restaurants had started to change the structure of Cairo. The whites had lost ground. This decision could result in the beginning of a retreat. They had been on the defensive and now would have to take the offensive if they hoped to preserve their exploitive rule. And they certainly were going to take the offensive.

SHORTLY after hearing about the pool that Wednesday morning, we heard about the meeting at the Roller Bowl. It had been a meeting to reorganize the Cairo White Citizens Committee. I remembered the door of the Roller Bowl. The sign, boldly proclaiming "Closed," had been stuck to the door with an ice pick.

The president of the Committee and operator of a Cairo pool room, Fred Sullivan, said the group's purpose was to "see that the rights of white persons in Cairo are protected." Sullivan didn't explain what he considered those rights to be. He did, however, note, "Some of my friends are Negroes."

At noon, thirty of us held a prayer vigil in front of City Hall to register protest against the situation in Albany, Georgia as well as that in Cairo. After lunch and a brief meeting we went to the swimming pool, hoping this time to be able to gain admittance. By the time we arrived, the *Cairo Evening Citizen* was out with the story of the Attorney General's opinion on page one.

An ever-growing crowd of whites was waiting for us when we arrived. The Cairo police were there directing the heavy traffic caused by the influx, and the swimming pool manager stood behind a table in the pool's entranceway holding up the sign which had previously lain flat on the table: "Private Pool, Members Only."

"I say let them go swimming," a white yelled. "Them niggers got feathers just like ducks. The ducks swim in the river so let them niggers swim in the river too." He meant the Ohio River, the only place where Negroes could go to swim, but the place where youths also drowned every summer.

We went to the Roller Bowl again that night but it was closed, as it was also the next night. It was open on Friday night, except that the entrance was guarded by forty defiant whites. After a brief witness, everyone returned to Ward's Chapel. (The swimming pool remained closed to Negroes.)

Two weeks later, with no change in the situation having taken place, two hundred and fifty whites were waiting at the Roller Bowl. Some of these were going to hurl more than words. As the line of demonstrators ap-

proached the entrance, Charles Koen, the sixteen-year-old leader of the Cairo Nonviolent Freedom Committee who was at the head of the line, was clubbed by one of the twenty-five whites who stood outside. With this signal, whites poured from the rink and joined the others outside. About thirty whites attacked with fists, clubs and tire chains. Ten Negroes were chased on foot up the highway, gunshots ringing out behind them.

After being prodded by Reverend Ramsey and other movement members, police dispersed the crowd and arrested four whites. The four were released on five hundred dollars bond, posted by the rink owner and White Citizens Committee host, William Thistlewood.

Earlier in the afternoon of that same day, eight Negro youths were tried in court, convicted and fined thirty-five dollars each for demonstrating at the swimming pool, where their legal right of admission was denied. While the trial was in progress, Willie Taylor, ten-year-old son of one of the women in court, drowned in the Ohio River where he was swimming.

The Roller Bowl and swimming pool closed, the swimming pool for "filter trouble," an early end to the season. The Roller Bowl reopened and on September 6, almost three weeks later, admitted two Negro couples. Roller skating rinks are specifically mentioned in the Illinois public accommodations statute and Thistlewood was in the middle of fighting a case through the courts, on Fourteenth Amendment grounds. But now, without awaiting the outcome of the case, Thistlewood had finally integrated his skating rink.

Then on Wednesday, September 26, a twenty-day-old ordinance regulating "parades," which left interpretation up to the police, was used for the first time and twenty-eight demonstrators who had marched in downtown Cairo were arrested. When a number gathered in front of the City Hall the next night to protest the arrests, police used tear gas to disperse the group and arrested some more demonstrators. The NAACP then sought an injunction against the ordinance and further demonstrations were canceled temporarily.

But all that is being done now by whites is only hedging, only temporary stop-gap action made on the run to slow down the movement toward freedom and dignity that is advancing in Cairo, Illinois. And as that movement advances there, in the "city where southern hospitality meets northern industry," freedom and dignity will assert itself in both the North and South.

