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Front Cover: Thousand Springs Valley, Nevada. (*Polly Aird*)

Notes and Documents

Bethel AME: The Oldest Surviving African-American Church in Nevada

MELLA ROTHWELL HARMON

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Reno's small African-American population had few social institutions to champion its causes or to provide continuity to its social life, but the first and most enduring of these was the Bethel AME Church. Built in 1910 as Reno's first black church,¹ it is the longest operating African-American congregation in Nevada. Holding to the tenets of the African Methodist Episcopal Church to provide opportunities for self-expression and fuller involvement in society, Bethel AME Church has fostered social equality through its active role in the community, through its direct link with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and through its abiding dignity in the face of conspicuous and unrelenting discrimination.

Bethel AME Church is located at 220 Bell Street in Reno, a tiny building on a tiny .039-acre parcel located just south of the railroad tracks that run east and west through town. The building was constructed by Reno's African Methodist Episcopal congregation, which had been established just three years earlier in 1907. The original church building, which exists beneath the surface of the brick expansion undertaken in 1941, was a small rectangular, gable-roofed, clapboard building with a centrally placed, enclosed hip-roofed vestibule, and a single entry door. The most prominent features of the little church were the four Gothic pointed-arch stained glass windows.

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It is the remodeled version of the building that stands today. Still rectangular in shape, the 1,782-square-foot building encompasses the original sanctuary, an enlarged vestibule, and a full basement that houses a kitchen, furnace, and air conditioning unit. Additional space on the north side provides a parlor, library and study, choir room, and the pastor's office. A 1941 rendering of the proposed building shows a more formal gabled entrance than was actually built. A simple wooden cross adorns the peak of the gabled roof. At one time, the cross was outlined in neon, but only a small section of tubing remains.



Bethel AME Church building, 220 Bell Street, Reno. (*Nevada State Historic Preservation Office, Carson City*)

BLACKS IN NEVADA

African Americans have long been a small, albeit persistent, component of Nevada's population. Black Americans were with the first exploratory probes made by the United States into the Great Basin in the early 1840s. Prominent among them was Jacob Dodson, who accompanied John C. Frémont's expedition, and mountain man James P. Beckwourth, who found the lowest pass over the Sierra just north of the Truckee Meadows in 1850. The route soon took on the name Beckwourth Pass, across which California State Highway 70 eventually extended into Sierra Valley.

With the discovery of the Comstock Lode in 1859, some blacks came to the area as they had to the gold rush in California ten years earlier. Although for the most part black men were excluded from high-paying jobs in the mines, some were able to secure lower-level employment. Blacks filled a variety of jobs in nineteenth-century Nevada. Women worked as hairdressers, waitresses, and as maids and caretakers for children, and men often found employment in a variety of service occupations. There were a number of black businesses on the Comstock, including barbering, which was profitable and respected. A recent archaeological excavation of Virginia City's successful Boston Saloon unearthed the remains of an African-American business operated by William A.G. Brown, a freeman from Massachusetts.² Other nineteenth-century black saloons are known from the historical records, including one in Carson City. In other parts of the territory, blacks worked as cowboys, ranch foremen, and ranch operators. For example, Ben Palmer was at one time the largest taxpayer in Douglas County. He and his sister, Charlotte Barber, were among the first non-native settlers in Carson Valley, and one of Charlotte's children was the first non-native child born in the valley.³

Even before Nevada's statehood in October 1864, blacks in the territory established churches, fraternal organizations, literary societies, political organizations, and other groups. The first Baptist church to be formed in Nevada was organized by blacks in Virginia City in 1863. Within the next decade, the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the AME Zion Church were established, as were several Masonic lodges. Ashlar Lodge No. 8, of Prince Hall Masonry,⁴ was organized in Virginia City in 1867. It operated until the 1880s, when known records of its existence cease. A second Prince Hall lodge, St. John's Lodge No. 13, was established in Carson City in 1875, but with such a small black population it was unable to sustain itself. Other groups with educational, social, and cultural goals were organized in Virginia City and Carson City in the 1860s and 1870s. Among these were the United Sons of Freedom, which was a "benevolent association of colored persons."⁵ The Dumas Social and Literary Club was organized in Virginia City in 1874, and was dedicated to the self-improvement of its members. The club met at the AME church, which is appropriate since education as a means of self-improvement is one of the underlying tenets of the AME discipline. Other social and political clubs were established, but their names have not survived.⁶ With the exception of the AME Church in Virginia City, which burned in the 1875 fire and was not rebuilt, none of these organizations constructed buildings to house their activities.

In 1860 the black population totaled 44 in the section of Utah Territory that was to become Nevada. It peaked at 396 in the late nineteenth-century.⁷ During its territorial days, Nevada displayed antislavery inclinations, and the pro-Union Republican party dominated the political scene until the 1870s. These conditions did not, however, preclude racial discrimination. The earliest territorial legislatures prohibited blacks from voting, holding political office, serv-

ing in the legal profession, or military service. Blacks were subject to civil, criminal, and tax law, but could not serve as jurors or witnesses in cases involving whites. Intermarriage with whites was prohibited and punishable by one to two years in territorial prison for both the offenders and the person solemnizing the union. Nevada's antimiscegenation laws were not repealed until 1959.⁸ In the early years, Nevada's schools were racially segregated by statute (to exclude blacks, Indians, and Asians). The small size of the black population did not provide the minimum number of students necessary for a separate school, and when the state refused to hire a teacher for black students, the black community sued. In 1872, the State Supreme Court declared school segregation unconstitutional.⁹

THE AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH MOVEMENT

The African Methodist Episcopal Church traces its roots to 1787, when Richard Allen and his followers in Philadelphia organized the Free African Society for blacks who had been denied freedom of worship in their chosen denomination.¹⁰ The society was established in response to blacks' need for self-expression and fuller involvement in society, and as a means to gain a sense of dignity and self-respect. To foster these goals, the society emphasized education as a means of self-help. From the beginning, the church offered night classes for members, and in 1808 Allen and others in the society established an insurance society for slaves and freemen in America. The first members of the Free African Society, although poor and uneducated, purchased an old smithy in Philadelphia, which later became the first Bethel AME Church.¹¹ This church still stands today and is known as Mother Bethel.¹²

The Methodist Episcopal Conference took charge of the church established by Allen and the Free African Society, and charged exorbitant fees for supplying an ordained minister. Eventually, the society refused to accept the white pastors, and Richard Allen applied for a writ of mandamus for the right to ordination and the pulpit of the black church. With the help of a well-known attorney, the plight of Allen and the society was brought to court, and the suit was settled in favor of the black organization.¹³ This led to the establishment of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, controlled by African Americans and dedicated to improving their condition.

Although generally following the doctrine of the Methodist Episcopal Church (ME), the AME Church eliminated the pro-slavery provisions in the Methodist Discipline. Richard Allen became AME's first bishop, and in 1816, at a first annual conference, the church combined with other black churches in Baltimore, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, and other Pennsylvania communities.¹⁴ By 1856, the AME Church boasted about twenty thousand members. The church's goal was to improve relations between blacks and whites and to

instill a sense of civic pride in blacks. To accomplish the latter, the church set out to offer support and services to the community, thus fostering a tradition of public service among AME members.¹⁵

Prior to the Civil War, the AME Church was banned from many areas in the South because slave owners feared slave revolts. In 1863, when Union forces occupied parts of coastal South Carolina, AME missionaries went from Baltimore to Charleston to establish churches. By 1866, AME churches were organized in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. Following the Civil War, the AME Church took an active role in Reconstruction politics to seek civil and political equality for blacks. These activities established for the AME Church a reputation for community and political activism.¹⁶

During the last half of the nineteenth-century, the AME Church was one of the largest of the black churches, as it expanded nationwide with the migration of freed blacks from the South. The AME Church also extended its missionary activities overseas, with more than twenty-two thousand churches in Africa and the Caribbean.¹⁷ AME churches have historically played significant roles in matters of civil rights. From participation in the Underground Railroad of the mid-nineteenth century to the activism of the civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century, the AME Church has championed equal rights for African-Americans.

BETHEL AME CHURCH IN NEVADA

The earliest black religious congregation in Nevada may have emerged from an attempt to organize a branch of the Methodist Church South in Virginia City in 1862. The effort was largely unsuccessful, beyond the occasional visit from a pastor of that denomination.¹⁸ The first Baptist Church in Nevada was formed by a black congregation that met in a meeting house on B Street in Virginia City. Although several white people attended services there, the church was established to serve the black population. Samuel T. Wagner, a founding member, stated that the blacks wanted their own church in order that "they might worship God according to the dictates of their own conscience and in their own peculiar way, without interfering with or coming into contact with their white brethren."¹⁹

The AME Church of California supervised churches in other western states including Oregon, Nevada, and Idaho, as well as British Columbia. Its first annual convention was held in 1863. One account of Elder Jacob Mitchell's visit to Virginia City in 1862 notes:

... on his arrival there he was cordially received. Preparations for meetings had been made by the brethren, who had been apprised of his intended visit. The Court House of that city was opened for him to preach to the people in. On the first Sabbath our

meeting was numerously attended; the audience appeared deeply interested, and a collection of \$100 was taken up. Our brethren there have organized a building committee, and bought a lot for the erection of a house of worship. The original size of their lot was 100 x 100 feet. Of this the brethren had been induced to sell two lots, each 100 x 25 feet, They deem their lot sufficiently large, and it has finally cost them \$100. They have now in their fund, towards a building, \$390.²⁰

Before this building was constructed, the white Methodist Episcopal Church in Virginia City, which had just built a new church, opened its former meeting-house to the AME congregation for its services. Elder Mitchell reported that it was there that "I had the happiness of taking twenty-three of my brethren and sisters by the hand, and organizing a branch of the Church militant, under the AME Discipline."²¹ This organization of the Virginia City AME congregation presumably occurred at some time during the year following the annual convention in September 1863. Of the AME Church, an 1864-1865 directory indicates that "a neat and substantial church has lately been built on F Street, and religious services are held every Sunday."²² This information is a bit confusing, as a notice was published by Bishop Ward in 1870 that the church in Virginia City was to be dedicated on October 1 of that year. In any case, the AME Church was destroyed in the great fire that devastated most of Virginia City in the fall of 1875. It is possible that the building was rebuilt, although church records suggest that the Church gave up attempts to provide a minister for Virginia City after the fire.

Carson City maintained a small AME congregation during the 1870s, often sharing ministers with Virginia City. Carson City also supported an AME Zion Church for a few years during that decade. No records have been found to suggest there were black churches in other parts of the state during the nineteenth-century. (This search included the records of the Church Survey conducted during the Great Depression by the Works Progress Administration, under the auspices of the Survey of State and Local Historical Records project.²³ Although the African-American population was small during the territorial years and early statehood, it made persistent efforts to maintain churches in spite of ongoing financial difficulties.

Nevada's black population fell markedly along with the general population decrease during the last decade of the nineteenth century with the 1900 census recording a total of 134 in the state. This loss of population can be attributed to a decline in the mining industry that had provided service jobs for blacks. By the second decade of the twentieth century, however, the black population had rebounded, and the 1910 census reported 513.²⁴ By then, Nevada's largest and most prosperous town was Reno, and it was home to the majority of the black population. Following more than twenty years without an established black church in Nevada, a Bethel AME congregation was organized in Reno, in 1907.

At the time, it was reported that there were 225 blacks in Reno, and the congregation anticipated a membership of about 50.²⁵ In spring 1910, the California Conference of the AME Church sent the Reverend William Solley to Reno

to facilitate construction of a church building for the small congregation. On March 16, 1910, Mr. Solley reported,

We obtained a permit today to build our church in Reno on the lot at 226 Bell Street, just back of Sheriff Ferrel's home. The lot had a house on it—Mrs. Hamilton's—but that was moved off to make room for the church. We will put up a simple little frame church at first, but a good little building. The Reno church will be built at once. I hope we can start on it tomorrow. At any rate we will get under way some day this week sure.²⁶

Good progress was made on the church, and the *Reno Evening Gazette* reported that the dedication ceremony was to be held Sunday, May 29, with the Reverend Wilson presiding. In the newspaper article on the event, Wilson indicated his desire that the ceremony be attended by all black people in Reno, and he extended a cordial invitation to white people as well.²⁷ The church's significance is manifest in the fact that it was only the second structure built by blacks in Nevada to house their social activities, and is clearly the oldest surviving black institution in the state.

In keeping with the tenets of their faith, congregants of Reno's Bethel AME Church strove to improve their place in society by making contributions to the community. The church was not only the seat of religious observance, but also a center of social interaction and participation. For the thirty-one years between the time Bethel AME Church was built and the 1941 remodeling, church members were active in community activities that sought to promote equality for blacks through the example of good citizenship. It is not surprising that in 1919 when Reno blacks, along with several prominent whites, formed the first Nevada chapter of the NAACP,²⁸ a majority of the founding membership was affiliated with Bethel AME Church.²⁹ Many of the names on the Application for Charter submitted to the NAACP Board of Directors listed their addresses at 226 Bell Street, a boardinghouse adjacent to the church that catered to black residents, and the chapter held its executive meetings at the church.³⁰

By early 1941, the presiding pastor at Bethel, the Reverend E. H. Booker, sought to find new quarters for the congregation, which wanted to expand its facilities to include a kitchen and space for a social hall. Members of Bethel AME raised money for their church by serving meals to the public on Friday nights. Since a number of the members worked as domestics in the homes of wealthy and prominent white families, the level of culinary skill was high, and the church dinners were popular among the white population. It was also an acceptable way for the whites to support the black community.³¹ To further the expansion goals of the church, the Reverend Booker made an offer on an existing building, Dania Hall, at Seventh and Sierra streets in northwest Reno.

At the February 24, 1941, Reno City Council meeting, however, a large group of property owners from the neighborhood appeared and demanded that the church be prevented from taking possession of the building. Protests were made by representatives of the university, the school board (Dania Hall was near Reno High School), and Gamma Phi Beta sorority. The protesters asserted that

property values in the neighborhood would suffer if the congregation were allowed to buy the hall. Since neither zoning nor ordinances applied to the case, a committee was named to address the neighbors' concerns.³² It is not known what the outcome of the committee's investigation was, but in the end it was clear that the intrusion of blacks into the "midst of an old established residence neighborhood which has grown up in the vicinity of the Reno high school and the university" would not be tolerated.³³ Hence, on March 29, 1941, the *Nevada State Journal* reported that the church had relinquished the contract to purchase Dania Hall. The Reverend Booker stated,

If we had anticipated that there would have been opposition to our purchase of the property, we would not have done so. It was the desire of the congregation to secure better quarters where our program of religious activity would have facilities for serving dinner through which we are able to help support our local church. It has now been decided to remodel the present church on Bell Street and we are appreciative of the interest and assistance which the community has given us in the past.³⁴

Mr. Booker reported that the remodeling project would entail construction of a basement with kitchen and dining room, the addition of three rooms for Sunday School activities and the application of a brick veneer on the entire structure. A fund drive for \$5,000 for the construction was undertaken, but by the end of May only \$852 had been raised.³⁵

Ultimately unable to raise the needed funds, the church petitioned the district court for permission to borrow the full \$5,000, and permission was granted to secure a loan on July 10, 1941.³⁶ On August 16, 1941, the *Nevada State Journal* reported on the opening of the remodeled church the previous evening. Besides several church officials, in attendance were Nevada Lieutenant Governor Maurice Sullivan, representing Governor E.P. Carville, E.H. Walker of the Reno Chamber of Commerce; and the Reverend P. H. Willis, retired Methodist minister from Sparks. The *Nevada State Journal* reported: "Improvements made to the Bethel A.M.E. Church include the addition of a full basement, measuring 40 x 50 feet. The basement includes a kitchen, furnace, and a complete air conditioning system. Other improvements include a church parlor, and a study room and an office for the pastor."³⁷

After the 1941 remodeling, the church remained unchanged until 1993, when the congregation acquired a larger building on Rock Boulevard in Sparks. The old church was purchased by a private owner and converted to a homeless shelter for veterans. In 1998, the Bethel congregation celebrated its ninety-first anniversary, having grown from twenty-five parishioners in 1985 to three hundred in 1998. Bethel AME is the oldest surviving black congregation in Nevada, and the first eighty-three years of its existence were at the Bell Street location. A retired minister, the Reverend Cecil Howard recalled, "The persons who started this church were genuine trailblazers. That is why we have this church today because we had no fear. We as African Americans may be persecuted, but with faith in God we don't have to face it alone."³⁸

CIVIL RIGHTS AND BETHEL AME CHURCH IN NEVADA

Bethel AME Church was a leading institution in Reno in the battle against the forces of persecution and discrimination. Reno's Bethel AME Church was at the center of the civil-rights movement in northern Nevada, but long before the organized activities of the 1950s and 1960s, Bethel provided a refuge and a foundation for blacks facing discrimination in the area. Blacks were among the first non-native settlers to the territory, and they faced a certain degree of prejudice and discrimination. With the Emancipation Proclamation, the end of the Civil War, and the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments to the Constitution, the future promised to be better for African Americans. But by the end of the nineteenth century, minority rights had suffered a series of setbacks that included passage of segregation laws widely referred to in the South as Jim Crow laws. By 1914, every southern state had passed laws that created two separate societies divided by race.³⁹ These trends also affected other states, including Nevada. For example, in November 1904, Reno's police chief ordered all unemployed blacks out of the city, reportedly in response to the attempted shooting of a police officer by a "black fiend." The move sought to remove from the city "all negroes not having any visible means of support."⁴⁰ Those refusing to comply with the order were to be jailed. The newspaper article suggested that the action was successful, and that the city was "well rid of a large number of negroes who have been hanging around the city for the past week."⁴¹ It was only three years after this mass eviction that the Bethel congregation was organized.

Until the 1960s, Reno practiced segregation, although it was not formally legislated. Blacks were restricted in their housing and employment options. They were not served in white restaurants and bars. Nor could they enter white casinos, or seek accommodations in white hotels. Such practices were common across Nevada, resulting in the state being compared in some circles to Mississippi. Blacks in Reno strove to maintain their dignity and sense of community in the face of social restrictions. Attempts to improve their lot included the organization of the Bethel AME Church in 1907, and the Colored Independent Political Club in 1910,⁴² as well as the colonization of eleven thousand acres by a hundred black families from the South in an area known as Black Springs, eighteen miles north of Reno.⁴³ To stem the tide of discrimination, in 1919 Reno's black community, organized the local chapter of the NAACP, which had been established ten years earlier in New York City by a group of black and white citizens committed to social justice.

Prompted in part by an epidemic of lynchings of blacks in the South, the NAACP set as its goal the abolition of forced segregation, the promotion of equal education, civil rights under the protection of the law, and an end to race violence. The NAACP strategy of ending discrimination through legal action evolved during its first twenty years, as did its commitment to nonviolence.

The NAACP focused its actions on the press, the petition, the ballot, and the courts to accomplish its goal of ensuring the political, educational, social, and economic equality of minority citizens.⁴⁴

Reno's NAACP chapter was approved by the national organization on September 23, 1919. The chapter application listed sixty members, and although several of the founding members were white, the membership represented a significant percentage of Reno's black population, which numbered about a hundred at the time. Many of the leaders of the Reno chapter were members of the Bethel AME Church.⁴⁵

Although the Reno chapter got off to an auspicious beginning, surviving records of the national organization do not offer much insight into the chapter's work, and no local records have been located. One significant activity involved the chapter's effort to secure prosecution of a white gambler for the shooting of a black porter at the Overland Hotel. On July 18, 1922, chapter secretary, Mrs. Thomas Russell, sent a news clipping of the incident to the NAACP national secretary. She also wrote that the man who shot William Hubbard was a gambler, and "we colored people are afraid his friends will try to squash the matter by paying a little money." Although Mrs. Russell's letter suggested that an indictment was expected, "we have decided to retain a lawyer to follow the case, and if justice is not meted out we will be in a position to carry the case on."⁴⁶ In the end the lawyer was not needed, as the perpetrator was not only indicted, but after two trials was convicted of attempted murder and sentenced to a term of one to two years.⁴⁷

The Reno branch of the NAACP was evidently active through 1923, but by 1924, membership had dropped to eighteen, and in 1927, the balance of the branch's funds was sent to the national office. In December 1933, an unsuccessful attempt to revive the branch was led by members of the Bethel AME Church.⁴⁸

In the mid 1930s, well-known black writer and poet Langston Hughes was in Reno. The reason for his visit is not known, although it might have been related to NAACP activities since Hughes kept an active schedule of speech making during those years. While in town, Hughes stayed with O. H. Hammonds and his wife at 226 Bell Street. The Hammondses were active in the NAACP and were members of Bethel AME Church. Hughes's stay in Reno resulted in a short story, "Slice Him Down,"⁴⁹ which was first published in 1936 in *Esquire Magazine*. Hughes also wrote an article in 1934 for the black newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Courier*. The subject of the article was Reno's O. H. Hammonds, who was notable for being the first black person employed as an observer with the United States Weather Bureau. Hughes explained how Hammonds, a former school teacher, had passed the civil service examination in 1907, and was immediately assigned to Reno. At the time of Langston Hughes's visit to Reno, Hammonds operated from his office in the downtown Reno post office building.⁵⁰

Although Elmer Rusco reports that the Reno NAACP was re-established in

the 1940s, it was in the 1950s and 1960s that a marked increase in civil-rights activism occurred statewide. Clearly, the 1940s brought to the fore specific issues of prejudice and discrimination in the community. The furor over the acquisition of Dania Hall in 1941, and the flagrant exclusion of blacks from Reno businesses, jobs, and housing revealed a community hostile to minority rights. Signs could be found in store windows stating "No Negroes, Indians, or dogs." Blacks were being forcibly removed from white business establishments, black families were being forced away from white-owned trailer parks and housing developments, and the town effectively was closed to African Americans.⁵¹

During the early 1940s, Bethel's minister, the Reverend Emmer Henry Booker, corresponded with Governor E. P. Carville in an attempt to promote racial equality. In early 1940, upon receipt of an informational flyer on the "75 Years of Negro Progress Exposition" to be held in Detroit in May 1940, Governor Carville wrote to the Reverend Emmer seeking his assistance in establishing a committee to sponsor a Nevada entry. In addition to himself, Rev. Booker recommended two Reno blacks for the commission, O. H. Hammonds of Bethel AME Church and Ray Cheatham of the Negro Political Science Club. Rev. Booker also recommended four white men: politically active and influential George Wingfield, attorney Lester D. Summerfield, Dr. Leon Hartman, and the Reverend Dr. William Moll Case. Governor Carville apparently supported Nevada's participation in the exposition because Rev. Booker wrote to the governor,

I share with you the idea that with all the other states participating in this extraordinary affair surely Nevada does not want to be left out, especially in view of the fact that her history is so significantly connected up with the granting of freedom of the Negroes in the United States. The Negroes would not have had an opportunity to make any progress had it not been for the birth of Nevada as a sovereign state. Her birth materially helped to save the union and return an oppressed people to their birth right.⁵²

Ironically, it was the following year that Bethel's congregation was forced to give up its plans to purchase Dania Hall, in response to the fierce protest by white property owners. The official program of the dedication service and the newspaper articles covering the event suggest there was some support from the white population for the black community. Still, the reality of discrimination continued unabated.⁵³

In 1952, a newly arrived contingent of black servicemen from the 3904th Composite Wing based at Stead Air Force Base, a few miles north of Reno, had to be bused to Sacramento for entertainment because they were unwelcome at Reno establishments. The newspaper headline read: "Air Force Men Taken to Sacramento to Avoid Humiliation Met with Here."⁵⁴ The Chamber of Commerce took immediate steps to determine the magnitude of the discrimination problem in Reno, but the chamber president expressed his doubt that "complete tolerance could be expected here at this time."⁵⁵ Reno blacks had long been relegated to segregated facilities from boardinghouses, restaurants, and churches to bars and casinos.

During the decade of the 1950s, Bethel AME Church continued in its role as arbiter for race relations. In 1954, Brotherhood Week activities were held at the church, and speakers from various denominations and organizations stressed the "immediate need for concerted action by all Reno groups in improving local conditions for minority groups."⁵⁶ The Bethel AME Church also maintained its position within the NAACP, serving as the official meeting location for the local organization, and contributing many of its congregants to the group's membership. During an "action-packed two hour meeting" at the church in January 1958, the NAACP voted to endorse the area's first low-cost public housing development proposed by the city's housing authority and approved by the Reno City Council. This meeting also set the branch's agenda for the coming year, which included the "study and development of proposals to be presented to the 1959 session of the state legislature."⁵⁷

By the end of the 1950s, the NAACP was becoming more active as the fight to end discrimination legally continued. In 1959, the Reno-Sparks branch filed a resolution opposing State Senate Bill 177, which proposed to abolish the state welfare department and transfer welfare activities to the county level. Prior to the 1960 winter Olympics, held at nearby Squaw Valley, California, the branch also petitioned the members of the city councils of Reno and Sparks, and the Washoe County Board of County Commissioners

... to make it mandatory upon the operators of all our places of public accommodation, including hotels, motels, restaurants, taverns and places of gaming and amusement to offer equal service and facilities to any well behaved, respectable person or persons who may desire same, regardless of his or their nationality, color or race.⁵⁸

In 1960, the local NAACP branch also undertook picketing at the Woolworth's store in Reno, presumably to protest the company's discriminatory practices in the South. The August 1960 newsletter of the NAACP admonished members to continue to "withhold your patronage from this store. This program has been very effective in many areas. Remember a dollar spent in this Woolworth Store denies a Negro a seat at a Woolworth lunch counter in the South."⁵⁹

Legislative relief from discrimination was slow in coming to Nevada. The first political action came in 1958, when a Reno judge declared Nevada's anti-miscegenation law unconstitutional. In 1959, the Nevada Legislature repealed this law, and other racist holdovers from the nineteenth-century and from an additional flurry of such legislation in 1919. In 1960, the legislature banned discrimination by public agencies, contractors for the state, and apprentice programs. It was not until 1965, a full year after passage of the federal Civil Rights Act, that Nevada enacted enforceable civil-rights legislation.⁶⁰ Housing continued to be a problem for blacks, however, and in February 1965 the situation erupted into violence as racists threw rocks and chunks of coal through the window of a home being purchased by a black family. The president of the Reno-Sparks Chapter of the NAACP, and pastor of Bethel AME Church, the

Reverend Howard Gloyd, reported that it had been the second such incident to occur that day.⁶¹ Nevada did not outlaw housing discrimination until 1971.

SUMMARY

Several scholars have observed the dearth of published information on Nevada's twentieth-century black experience. It is clear, however, that although conditions had seemed promising for blacks at the end of the Civil War, the coming of the Jim Crow era brought overt discrimination and de facto segregation to Nevada, particularly in the two largest cities of Reno and Las Vegas.

The Bethel AME Church houses the longest continually operating black congregation in Nevada; throughout its history it has fostered social equality through its active role in the community, through its direct link with the NAACP, and through its abiding dignity in the face of conspicuous and unrelenting discrimination. Along with the Moulin Rouge nightclub in Las Vegas, built in 1955, the Bethel AME Church in Reno stands as one of the most significant artifacts associated with the history of Nevada's black population.

Notes

- ¹The second black church in the area was the Second Baptist Church, built in Sparks in 1946.
- ²Ronald M. James, personal communication, 12 November 2000.
- ³Ed Johnson and Elmer R. Rusco, "The First Black Rancher," *Nevada, Magazine of the Real West* (Jan. - Feb. 1989), 26-27.
- ⁴Prince Hall Masonry is the oldest and largest secret fraternal organization of blacks, dating to 1775. Elmer R. Rusco, *Good Time Coming? Black Nevadans in the Nineteenth Century* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1975), 178-84.
- ⁵Rusco, *Good Time Coming?* 183.
- ⁶Rusco, *Good Time Coming?* 178-84.
- ⁷Warren d'Azevedo, "Nevada's Black Heritage: A Review of *Good Time Coming?*" *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, 35: 4 (Winter 1977), 261.
- ⁸Michael Coray, "African-Americans in Nevada," *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, 35:4, (Winter 1992), 239-57.
- ⁹Nevada Black History Project, *Nevada Black History: Yesterday and Today* (Reno: Nevada Humanities Committee, 1997), 4.
- ¹⁰Richard Allen and other blacks in Philadelphia were assigned special seats at St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church, but were not allowed full freedom of worship by the white congregation.
- ¹¹Richard Allen, *The Life Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen* (New York: Abington Press, 1960, rpt. Nashville: AME Sunday School Union/Legacy Publication 1990).
- ¹²Mother Bethel AME (webpage for Mother Bethel AME), available at <http://www.philly2000.com/ame.htm>, 2000.
- ¹³Allen, *Life Experience* (1960), 8.
- ¹⁴*Ibid.*
- ¹⁵Middle Tennessee University Center for Historic Preservation, *Powerful Artifacts: A Guide to Surveying and Documenting Rural African-American Churches in the South* (Murfreesboro: Middle Tennessee State University, 2000), 8.
- ¹⁶*Ibid.*
- ¹⁷*Ibid.*
- ¹⁸Myron Angel, *History of Nevada*, (Oakland: Thompson and West, 1881; Reprinted Berkeley: Howell-North, 1958), 209.
- ¹⁹Rusco, *Good Time Coming?*, (1975), 174.
- ²⁰Quoted in *ibid.*, 175-76.
- ²¹Webster's Dictionary defines the church militant as "the Christian church on earth, which is supposed to be engaged in a constant warfare against its enemies, and this is distinguished from the church triumphant in heaven." Rusco, *Good Time Coming?*, 176.
- ²²Rusco, *Good Time Coming?*, 177.
- ²³Miscellaneous WPA records can be found in MS278, the 39-box manuscript collection located at the Nevada Historical Society, Reno.
- ²⁴Rusco, *Good Time Coming?*, 177.
- ²⁵*Ibid.*, 124.
- ²⁶*Nevada State Journal* (17 March 1910), p. 2.
- ²⁷*Reno Evening Gazette* (19 May 1910), p.2.
- ²⁸The second chapter of the NAACP was organized in Las Vegas in 1927.
- ²⁹Elmer R. Rusco, "Civil Rights Activities in Nevada from 1900 to 1945," unpublished manuscript, 14.
- ³⁰National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Records, 1951-1965, Manuscript Collection, Special Collections Library, University of Nevada, Reno.
- ³¹Norma Washington, personal communication, 4 January 2001.
- ³²A 1917 U.S. Supreme Court case ruled unconstitutional a Louisville, Kentucky, ordinance requiring blacks to live in certain sections of the city. *Nevada State Journal* (25 February 1941).
- ³³*Reno Evening Gazette* (28 February 1941), 14.
- ³⁴*Nevada State Journal* (29 March 1941), 16.
- ³⁵*Ibid.*; *Nevada State Journal* (28 May 1941), 3.

- ³⁶*Reno Evening Gazette* (10 July 1941), 7.
- ³⁷*Nevada State Journal* (16 August 1941), 2.
- ³⁸*Reno Gazette Journal* (16 July 1998), p. 4C.
- ³⁹United States Black Online, *Jim Crow Laws*, available at <http://www.usbol.com>, 2000.
- ⁴⁰*Reno Evening Gazette* (17 November 1904), 1.
- ⁴¹*Ibid.*
- ⁴²*Nevada State Journal* (4 September 1910), 2.
- ⁴³*Territorial Enterprise* (26 March 1913), 1.
- ⁴⁴National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, *What You Should Know about the NAACP*, available at <http://www.naacp.org>, 2000.
- ⁴⁵Rusco, unpublished manuscript, 13-14.
- ⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 15.
- ⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 16.
- ⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 17.
- ⁴⁹"Slice Him Down" in *Short Stories of Langston Hughes*, Akiba Sullivan Harper, ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996).
- ⁵⁰*Nevada State Journal* (16 August 1941), 2.
- ⁵¹Washington, personal communication.
- ⁵²GOV-0366 File 010, Records of Governor Carville, Nevada State Archives, Carson City.
- ⁵³Elmer Rusco, personal communication, 13 November 2000.
- ⁵⁴*Nevada State Journal* (27 July 1952), 120. This was not the first time that the military presence near Reno contributed to social reform. In 1941, the Army Air Corps protested to city officials that the town's red light district served as an unwelcome distraction for airmen, which resulted in the banning of prostitution in Washoe County.
- ⁵⁵*Nevada State Journal* (30 July 1952), 14.
- ⁵⁶*Reno Evening Gazette* (23 February 1954), 2.
- ⁵⁷*Ibid.* (23 January 1958), 11. The Nevada Legislature meets biennially in odd-numbered years.
- ⁵⁸NC18/I/4, Manuscript Collection, Special Collections Library, University of Nevada, Reno.
- ⁵⁹Reno-Sparks NAACP Newsletter, August 1960, Manuscript Collection NC18, Special Collections Library, University of Nevada, Reno.
- ⁶⁰Nevada Black History Project, *Nevada Black History*, 7.
- ⁶¹*Nevada State Journal* (11 February 1965), 1.

