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AN EXPERIMENT IN RACE RELATIONS

By Bob Powers[1]

THERE was fear of a race riot in Richmond, California, during the late summer of 1945. Ever since the Detroit riots of 1943, when 35 persons were killed and property damage amounted to more than $2,000,000, there had been growing concern on the West coast that racial tension would explode into a riot.

In Richmond altercations between negroes and whites were on the increase. Fantastic rumors were to be heard in every barber shop, at every lodge meeting, and on many street corners. Alertness of the police amounted to tension.

One incident took place in a shipyard: A fight started between a white man and another worker who was negro, the latter having inadvertently kicked over a lunch pail. While only the two exchanged blows, many others came close to conflict. An alert officer noticed that during and immediately after the fight negroes and whites were gathering in separate groups, and that each man, as if by accident, had in his hand a wrench, a hammer, or a heavy drill. Guards were immediately summoned, and their timely arrival served to break the tension.

Another apparently trivial but significant incident was reported. Officer Olvera while patrolling came upon a negro and a white boy fighting. Questioned, the white boy replied: "Sure, I started it. He's got no business walking on this street. It's just for white people."

The boy's father came out of a nearby house. "I saw the fight from my window; and my kid was doin' all right, too! He'll teach that other kid his place."

Incidents of this kind, coupled with fast-spreading rumors, could not but disturb the city officials. Richmond, which had expanded to a city of 120,000 population during the war, found itself facing danger—almost one-tenth of its citizens were negroes. And now, with the war ended, cut-backs in production, lay-offs in the shipyards, uncertainty as to the future, and all the problems of readjustment facing the people of this community—trouble was brewing.

After many sleepless nights, the city manager decided to call for help from the American Council on Race Relations and the State Department of Justice. I was assigned by the Attorney General to work with Davis McEntire of the American Council and see what could be done.

McEntire and I met, for the first time, to discuss the problem and plan a course of action. We knew that a police department tends to reflect the prejudices of a community, that prejudiced officers do not inspire confidence in any group of the citizenry, and that people are more liable to riot when they hold their enforcement officers in contempt. Consequently we decided to give the police some training in human relations so that they could do a better job, allay fears, scotch rumors, afford all citizens a greater sense of security, and enhance their own prestige. As nothing like this had been attempted before in California, hardly in the Unit-

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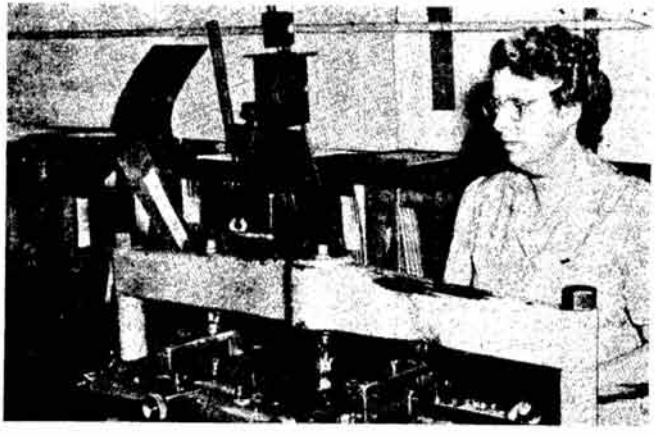

Making of Braille plates at the Braille Institute of America.
Alice Tilly is doing the Braille work on a Bahá'í book.

Bahá'í Exhibit, Palmer Fair, Palmer, Alaska.

ed States, we were free of any restriction by precedent.

One question which had to be answered was this: "How can good practical methods of handling minority group members be taught?" And the answer, of course, was that they can't be taught as skills or methods or techniques.

It proved fortunate that our final decision was to concentrate on eliminating prejudice and giving the officers a better understanding of the effects the environment of segregation and discrimination has on citizens in a democracy.

Eliminating prejudice and influencing social attitudes in the short time we had to devote to this project appeared to be a gigantic undertaking—almost impossible. We decided that more help was needed. After making four telephone calls we had promises of that help from Walter Gordon, a negro who is Chairman of the California Adult Authority of the Department of Corrections; Joseph James, another negro who was President of the San Francisco chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Joe Grant Masaoka of the Japanese American Citizens' League; and Ken Kato, a Nisei soldier just back from the Pacific. They were enthusiastic about helping.

Two weeks later, on a Monday morning, fourteen officers of the Richmond Police Department were assembled for a conference that was to last a week. Frankly they were skeptical that anything of value could come out of the course, yet it must be said to their credit that they were willing to "try anything once." On one point everyone was in agreement: something had to be done without delay.

McEntire was an economist who had for a number of years been devoting his full time to work in the field of race relations. His background made him an outsider to the police—a "do-gooder" or "social worker" they would have stereotyped him. However, I had had more than twenty years of experience in law enforcement and was known, at least by reputation, to all of the men present. They were willing to accept me, but with some reservations because of the company I was keeping.

McEntire opened the discussion by reviewing the problem nationally and locally. He had hardly finished his summation when one inspector spoke up: "I don't think there'd be any problem," he said belligerently, "if those people would keep their place!"

It was a fortunate remark reflecting the attitude of the officers and many members of the white community. Another officer turned to the inspector, "You say they should keep their place; but what is their place?"

The question was unanswerable, but it served to bring to the surface all of the prejudices, doubts, fears, and questions of those present. When the class adjourned for the day it was difficult to clear the room. No one had finished talking. All through that first meeting derogatory terms and epithets had been bandied about quite freely; and it appeared that our pupils thought they had gained an upper hand over their instructors.

Next day came the surprise. When the officers had been seated around the conference table, McEntire entered with Joseph James, introduced him and gave him a seat among the officers. On the following days there were other participants in the discussion, Walter Gordon, Joe Grant Masaoka, and Ken Kato. They answered many questions, making it clear that in so far as they and the people they represented were concerned, no public officer could advocate segregation or countenance discrimination and retain their respect or remain constant to his oath to "uphold the Constitution of the United States."

If nothing else had been accomplished, affording these policemen the opportunity to become friends with leading negroes and Japanese-Americans would have justified the whole undertaking. In miniature we had begun to solve the problem which is national and world-wide. Through bringing strangers together, we were breaking down the barriers of misunderstanding, fear, and distrust which separate people into potentially warring groups. Stagnant ponds of prejudice were beginning to evaporate

and the poisonous vapors to dispel.

Segregation came in for much discussion, and there developed an understanding of its effects on the Negro, the Jew, or anyone else who is so confined. One of the consultants explained: "Aside from the natural desire for decent homes, restricting a negro to some particular area is making him want to escape. And even when good housing is available, surrounding territory which cannot be entered because of restrictive covenants is a constant source of irritation. Segregation is a form of imprisonment, and since it is directly contrary to the principles of democracy and Christianity, it is fundamentally cruel and unjust."

Another consultant told the police officers: "When you, a white man, go into a restaurant only to find that the service is slow, the food is poor, and the prices are high, you cuss the service, the food, the prices, the management, or even the ration boards. But you do not identify these unsatisfactory conditions with the fact that you have skin of a particular color; there is no personal affront. Yet when I, as a negro, go into a restaurant I am inclined to feel that the slow service means —'Why did you come here in the first place?' The poor food—'You know we don't want you here' And the high prices—'Maybe you will stay out next time'."

During the course of the conferences, the President of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People chapter spent two hours sitting down at a table discussing the problems of race relations with police inspectors, sergeants and patrolmen. He told of his own experiences and those of his friends; and he spoke of what the Negro eventually hopes to get from and contribute to life in Amcrica.

He told of an American boy who, having spent years in study and preparation to fit himself for a job, finds the doors of employment locked against him by bigotry—this because he happens to be one-sixteenth Negro. He discussed the irresponsible, rabble-rousing leaders among negroes who profit from stirring up hatred. He told the police officers that he, as a negro, believed that they were doing him a service when they suppress the negro hoodlum, the rowdy, and the thug. He went on to tell them how concerned farsighted negroes are over any bad conduct by others. Within a half-hour questions were coming too fast for him to answer. He was no longer the representative of a minority group; he was a confrere—with special knowledge, yes; but with special interest, no. All differences had disappeared in the search for and contribution to better understanding.

The California Adult Authority fixes prison terms and serves as a parole board. Its Chairman, a lawyer and former police officer, was present during two of the sessions. He told of the problems faced by a negro peace officer; not only those encountered in dealing with the public, but also those of relationship with white members of a force. And he convinced some of the group that a negro can serve in law enforcement performing general duties—in contact with all kinds of people—that he need not be confined to the ghetto.

During one of the conferences a regional representative of the Japanese-American Citizens' League and a young Japanese-American who, as a staff sergeant in the United States Army, had served with the Marines from Guadalcanal to Leyte, told of tragic experiences of their people uprooted from the west coast during the war and confined in concentration camps. The young soldier related his story of service with the Marines, of the protection thrown around him to prevent his being shot through mistake; of the extreme consideration with which he was treated by his fellow fighting men; and of an experience which was significant because it was the only unpleasant one he encountered in more than two years of service. Even that consisted merely in one marine's referring to him as a "Jap."

No lectures, no prepared speeches were given. There were interruptions, questions, contrary stands taken on issues. Control was merely direction of conversation toward knowledge, sympathy, and solution of the problems of

Japanese-Americans, Mexicans, Negroes—and policemen.

In no instance, during the series of conferences was any peace officer told how he should handle a case, or how he should conduct himself; but each was very definitely given the opportunity to understand the effect of his actions, good or bad, on the people with whom he was dealing, on his department, and on himself as an individual.

There were ten hours spent by fourteen police officers, a race relations expert, and various of the consultants, sitting around a table engaged in the common purpose of trying to gain a better understanding of their fellowmen.

And it is significant that whereas on the first day derogatory and contemptuous terms were carelessly and frequently used, on the last day of the discussions, anything other than "colored man" or "Negro" or "Japanese-American" caused group discomfort, the raising of eyebrows by those present.

Shortly after these original conferences were completed the entire police force was ordered into a meeting. A panel of officers and consultants told those assembled what had been learned. Questions were asked from the audience. They were answered with authority.

A test of the effectiveness of this experiment came early in October. The incident occurred which might have precipitated a riot. Trouble developed between negro and white children in the schools; there were fights; rumors spread like a grass-fire on a windy day; the white pupils went on strike demanding segregation.

But a small group of informed and assured policemen quickly averted the danger. They met with both negro and white groups; they insisted that the school authorities take a firm stand; they worked with radio stations and newspapers to dispel rumors; and they gave assurance of protection and fair treatment to the negroes in the community. Within a week all was quiet, the children back in school, the tension broken.

Manuel Gorgas, First Indian Bahá'í of Panama.

McEntire and I had separated, considering our job done. He went back to his work and I to mine. We didn't realize that we had set in motion forces that were greater than either of us.

Inquiries started coming in regarding our experiment. We found it necessary to write a booklet, *"A Guide To Race Relations for Police Officers."* It was published by the State of California and re-printed by the American Council on Race Relations. More than 15,000 copies went to police chiefs and other enforcement officers throughout the United States. The story was told in newspapers all over the country. *The New York Times* devoted two columns to it; Eleanor Roosevelt told of the experiment in her column, "My Day." *The Saturday Evening Post* published an account in its issue of December 28, 1946. The State Department, early in 1947, decided to tell the story in documentary film to the people of other countries; the script has been written.

The Rosenwald Fund and the Columbia Foundation are jointly exploring the possibility of using training films based on the Richmond Experiment to teach law enforcement officers something of

the evils of segregation and the nature of prejudice. Five-thousand dollars have been made available for research and the writing of scripts.

This is not an account of how the problems arising from racial tension were solved. It is the story of the instrumentality of two men who, fumbling and groping in an effort to improve the way men live together, attained results far beyond their expectations. The publicity and the effects of our effort were gratifying. However, my greatest satisfaction came from a letter written by one of the officers who had participated in the conferences. He wrote:

> "Being a policeman I naturally come into contact with the criminal element and I had been judging all negroes accordingly. After attending the classes on race relations I understand things a lot better. I know that these classes were a real step in the right direction. If it were only possible to teach every person what I know now, it would be a great thing for mankind. You can depend on me to do whatever I can to help you attain your goal."