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***What Has, and Still Is, Going Wrong in Howard County Maryland***

*"Do we need to go back to the beginning," as Trump is advocating. Or maybe as progressive leaders are encouraging, we need a different plan to interpret our constitution through a more social approach.*

*We are sharing an article to provide a "historical" reference that remains relevant in Howard County today.*

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***HOWARD COUNTY COMPLACENCY ROCKED BY RACIAL SLUR FALLOUT***

March 13, 1988

by Veronica T. Jennings

***The Washington Post***

Robert Birdsong grew up in the segregated neighborhoods of Chicago and Detroit. Even when his family moved to racially mixed subdivisions, white flight turned the streets into all-black enclaves within a few years.

Birdsong envisioned raising his family in an ideal community built on racial harmony and cultural diversity. The place he found was Columbia in Howard County.

"We moved here because of the openness and the good reputation of the school system," Birdsong said. "We wanted to live in an integrated system."

But last week, Birdsong's ideals and those of many other Howard County blacks were at least temporarily soured by the news that the manager of the Turf Valley Country Club, a private resort where many of them had danced and dined, had referred to a black man as a "nigger."

The comments, recorded on the telephone answering machine of an NAACP member after the manager thought the connection had been broken, shocked many in Howard County, both black and white. Although there have been other isolated racial incidents in the county, the Turf Valley controversy particularly outraged the large group of black doctors, dentists, lawyers, business people and government workers who have lived and worked with their upwardly mobile neighbors in the fashionable town houses, condominiums and single-family houses that dot the county

The incident brought together black civic, social and religious organizations, many of whose members until last week had met only on the tennis courts or at church. They became a political force that pressured the club's owner to fire the manager who made the remarks, institute sensitivity training for his employees and apologize to the black community.

"It was a bolt out of the blue," said Birdsong, vice president of the Columbia alumni chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi, a black fraternity. "It was so deplorable and blatant."

The spark that galvanized the black community was the tape-recorded remarks of the manager of the country club near Ellicott City in which he referred to NAACP member Sherman Howell as "nigger" several times.

Other voices on the tape were heard laughing and saying, "Well, we don't like niggers," and "I'm discriminated because all the niggers get all the jobs."

It wasn't that blacks were so naive to think the derogatory term was never used, said Earl Saunders, the owner of the Budget Instant Printing in Ellicott City. But the harshness of the words "nigger" jolted many blacks who had lived for years in the integrated community with few racial incidents.

"It was the choice of words," said attorney Lillie Wesley, a Harvard graduate who moved to Columbia in 1976. "We all get angry, hurt and disappointed. But we usually don't resort to racial epithets. You don't attack someone on skin color or ethnic origin because you're angry."

Blacks comprise about 14 percent of the approximately 166,000 residents of the largely rural county, which was home of 17th century black astronomer and inventor Benjamin Banneker and today houses 25 black congregations.

Some blacks live in old enclaves in Guilford south of Columbia, Elkridge in the east near Anne Arundel County, and Ellicott City just west of Baltimore.

Many of them are concentrated in Columbia, a town built 20 years ago on the dream of Baltimore mortgage banker James W. Rouse. The Rouse philosophy seemed simple: Design a community that would attract peoples of diverse ages, races, incomes and backgrounds.

"Columbia became a haven for a considerable number of middle-class blacks who came from Washington, D.C., or Baltimore in hopes of raising children in an open, desegregated society free of drugs, violence and other ills of the inner city," said the Rev. Herbert Eaton, organizer of the boycott of the club.

"But what they forgot was that they were moving to an area with people with their own set of values. They didn't change those values merely because other people moved into the area," said Eaton, a former minister at Martin Luther King Jr.'s Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Ala.

Blacks are a fragmented part of the Howard County community, active in a network of black fraternal and social organizations, but also blending in with other racial groups at tennis matches, PTA meetings, golf games and swimming meets, black residents said.

According to several prominent black residents, Howard's black community had not been politically aggressive. Blacks vote strongly Democratic, but have no powerful allegiance to presidential contender Jesse L. Jackson or any other candidate.

Many of the black organizations date to the early 1970s, when blacks moved to Columbia in large numbers from urban centers throughout the country as well as Washington and Baltimore, said Birdsong. Along with black sororities and fraternities, blacks formed chapters of Jack and Jill (a cultural and education club for children), the National Association of Negro Business and Professional Women Inc., and other professional organizations to press for increased education opportunities for blacks as well as business advancement.

Despite their affluence, blacks in Howard County have not been immune to race-related problems. A 1984 investigation by the county NAACP branch asserted that the county had inadequate minority hiring and promotion in the police and fire departments.

Last year, the clerk of the circuit court filed criminal charges against the chairman of the Human Rights Commission after the chairman publicly disclosed its investigation into the lack of minorities in the clerk's office. The charges of violating a state confidentiality law were later dismissed.

In another incident, the County Council recently chastised the Human Rights Commission for questioning the county's minority hiring record.

Two weeks ago, an elderly black couple in Laurel reported a cross burning on their lawn.

But concern about these civil rights issues has been left to a few activists, said Dr. Harvey Webb, a dental surgeon.

"Everybody was tied up making a living in Washington or Baltimore. We did not develop as a cohesive unit," said Webb, a native of the District of Columbia who moved to Columbia in 1971.

Often the Rev. John L. Wright, former president of the county NAACP and now head of the Maryland state branch, was what one black resident called the lightning rod for race issues.

Wright, a Baltimore native who has lived in Columbia for 16 years, is a firebrand leader, known for confrontational tactics. Sometimes the battle has been lonely, he said.

"It's very strange," said Wright. "We'll fight the immediate problem, then we seem to go to sleep. We need a more vigilant spirit."

The Turf Valley incident may change that complacency. Starting with the county NAACP, which has a membership of about 1,000, the word spread rapidly through the black community about the manager's remarks. Webb said he passed along the news to several friends while working as a poll watcher for the March 8 "Super Tuesday" presidential primary.

A week ago, a broad-based group of black religious and community groups gathered in the basement of Wright's church to brainstorm about strategies to combat the Turf Valley incident.

The committee issued a list of demands, including the firing of the manager, suspension of the club's liquor license and a human rights investigation of the club and other enterprises of Nicholas B. Mangione Sr., its owner. Most of the black community appeared elated Thursday when Mangione fired Frederick B. Grimmel Jr., his manager and nephew, and agreed to sensitivity training for club employees.

But will the momentum last? Eaton said the issue will not die out soon.

"This will be on the front burner for a while," said Eaton, pastor of St. John's Baptist Church. "We have much talking yet to do."

Webb said the solution may be in reevaluating the dream of racial harmony and integration in Columbia.

"We need to go back to the beginning," he said. "We might come up with a different dream. We have to find a dream we all can believe in and move on."