

Rev. Leroy Patrick:

**Dealing with apartheid, Pittsburgh-style,
at the Highland Park Pool in the 1950s**

By REVEREND LEROY PATRICK

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Reverend Patrick, who was pastor of the Bethesda United Presbyterian Church in Homewood for 35 years until his recent retirement, has served as an Urban League Board member and a leader in the movement for civil rights and interracial understanding. He recalls here the successful battle to integrate the city's public swimming pools.)

The Urban League has contended with Pittsburgh's brand of apartheid over the years. This city, just a few miles north of the Mason-Dixon Line, has exhibited many of the customs and practices formerly peculiar to the South.

For example, some restaurants outside of the downtown area once refused to serve blacks. The custom was especially prevalent in ethnic neighborhoods, and teachers, assigned to teach in these areas, complained that they had no place to have lunch. One must keep in mind that this was before the passage of public accommodations laws prohibiting such discrimination.

Another example: certain bowling alleys would not serve blacks. The manager would insist that all lanes were reserved when they were approached by blacks. Or he would let blacks have the lanes, but the pin boys, who were white, would not set up for blacks. The manager would then enter his disclaimer for their conduct by asserting that they were not, after all, his employees. The boys just came in off the street to make a little money, he would say. There were other areas, too, where discrimination was the rule:

housing, employment, education, labor unions, etc.

But the most intractable, the most blatant, the most insulting--because it was so public--was Pittsburgh's *de facto* policy on the use of its swimming pools. In the East End, the notorious "ink well" on Washington Boulevard was the black pool. Beautiful, well-kept Highland Park Pool was reserved for whites. Whites from nearby Larimer Avenue considered it their sacred duty to keep it this way. Not far away, on Paulson Avenue, off Lemington, there was a neighborhood pool. This, too, was off-limits to blacks living in this nearby bi-racial community.

The irony was that blacks could frequent Highland Park proper and its picnic groves as well as the playground adjacent to Paulson pool. No public outcry prevented their use.

Isolated attempts, prior to 1951, had been made to integrate Pittsburgh's swimming pools. As early as 1924, the Urban League's Home-School Visitor, Georgine Pearce Brown, was quietly advocating the admission of blacks to the Westinghouse High School swimming pool, and the following year, League Executive Director John T. Clark fired off an angry letter to the city concerning the treatment blacks were receiving at Kennywood Pool. In 1948 an interracial group associated with the Henry Wallace Presidential campaign started a near-riot when it attempted to swim in the Highland Park pool, and in 1950, another unsuccessful attempt at integration was made.

Finally, in 1951, the new Urban League Executive Director, Alexander J. Allen, and I decided that the time had come to challenge and change this sorry state of affairs.

We gave advance notice to the City through Chris Motz, who was executive director of the Civic Unity Council, an agency created by the Mayor to work in the area of race relations. (This was the forerunner of the city's Fair

Employment Practices Commission and the present Commission on Human Relations.) With my wife's prayers and a group of young people from the church, we set off one day for a swim in the Highland Park Pool. Our notice to the Civic Unity Council had not fallen on deaf ears: the pool and locker rooms were surrounded by a battalion of police.

When we entered the pool, every white person left the water and began taunting us, scooping up handfuls of water and yelling, "Dirty water! Nigger water!" They warned the young people of the dire consequences that awaited them if they ventured onto Larimer Avenue, where some of the white youth lived, but no one attempted bodily harm.

After about an hour, we left the water, escorted by the police, and returned to the grove where other members of our group were picnicking. None of the youth could be prevailed upon to return to the pool during the remainder of that summer of 1951, but I did encourage a few other groups to undertake the challenge before the summer ended.

The League's Joe Allen was not a part of this particular skirmish, but he was busy putting together what became known as the Swimming Pool Committee. This was an *ad hoc* coalition of organizations formed for the express purpose of interpreting the law to the wider community and working to integrate the pools of the city. The committee remained intact for about two years, with Allen and the Urban League giving much-needed guidance and staff support. It met during the fall, winter, and spring of 1951-52 and beyond.

By the summer of 1952, when the swimming season opened, the committee's work was rewarded. I escorted groups of young people and adults into the pool for 25 successive days. Police were present in good numbers, and a wide canvas curtain was attached to the wire fence to prevent people outside the pool to

watch what was going on inside. There were no incidents. By the end of the summer, blacks were going to the pool on their own, and I never returned.

In the meantime, when activity began at Highland Park in 1951, complaints poured in to the Urban League and to me about Paulson Pool. With a young woman, Gerri Reynolds, who lived across the street from the pool, I went to "test the water" at Paulson. Once again as soon as we entered it, the pool emptied--except for a half-dozen young men who surrounded us and attacked us with tremendous splashes of water. Ostensibly they were "playing" by splashing each other, not the two victims. A crowd began to gather, and a couple of policemen showed up but made no attempt to stop the "fun," possibly because no bodily contact occurred. Finally we managed to escape our tormenters, making a quick change in our respective locker rooms and an even quicker exit from the area.

The next day, after consulting with Allen and others, I returned with an interracial group to whom the white swimmers again abandoned the pool. The crowd roared its approval as some of the swimmers joined bystanders outside the pool and began throwing stones at us. We were not an easy target since the stones had to be hurled high over the fence. Only one of us failed to successfully dodge the rocks, and she was not seriously hurt.

Paulson pool was closed the next day, drained, and cleared of the rocks and stones, and it became a pressing agenda item for the Swimming Pool Committee although no further attempts at integration were made that summer.

Joe Allen held a degree in divinity, as I did, but--unlike me--he was an expert swimmer. In fact, in introducing Joe at one of his first Urban League meetings in 1950, veteran *Courier* editor P. L. Prattis made the point that Allen had worked for a time as a lifeguard. (Those were difficult years for the

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League, which was facing severe budget cuts from the Community Chest, and Prattis remarked that the organization was desperately "in need of life-saving.") No one would have suspected then that, two years later, Allen would be called upon to use those skills literally.

In the summer of 1952, the Swimming Pool Committee and the City agreed that the pool should open with a black lifeguard to ensure its integration. With support from his family and the Urban League Board, Joe arranged to take his vacation in half-days. His mornings were spent in the Urban League office; his afternoons, as lifeguard at the Paulson Pool.

The plan worked. No complaints were forthcoming, at Paulson or at other pools in the city, and the books were closed, as it were, on swimming pool desegregation.

Strangely enough, however, no daily newspaper nor any radio or television station saw fit to carry any reports of that harrowing period. Only the *Pittsburgh Courier* chronicled the events leading to the integration of Pittsburgh's swimming pools.