

18 July 1946

Interviews with Miss Zora Tennant and Jimmy Lewis...

Lynnwood Parker and I visited Miss Tennant's office together (at her request); besides Miss Tennant, there were Miss Easterday, a member of the Board, Rex Lutz, an assistant playground director; and Miss Swanson, assistant to Miss Tennant.

Miss Tennant expressed her opinion that the complaint I had made protesting the undemocratic practice of the city prohibiting Negroes from the use of the municipal swimming pool should have originated with the director (i. e. Lynnwood Parker) rather than with me. My reply was that I had taken the initiative as a private individual and not as the assistant director of Whittier Playground.

She then went on to say that the situation was the affair of the Urban League and no business of mine whatever. I replied that it was the affair of every citizen of Lincoln -- that she and I were as responsible for the situation as anybody, and that my recent actions were taken with the idea of trying to rectify the unjust situation.

Miss Tennant then cited what had been done by their department for the welfare of ~~the~~ Negroes: The Urban League Center, etc. I observed that those facts did not justify their being denied access to the municipal pool as other taxpayers, and that at any rate segregation was not the answer; I further stated that it would have been more ideal if the department had attempted to allow Negroes into its other programs rather than build the Urban League Center.

Miss Tennant then became flustered and attempted to have Miss Easterday cite precedence, but Miss Easterday was unable to do so, saying only that the pool depended on attendance for upkeep. Miss Tennant, without hearing any more from me brought my half of the interview to a close by accepting my resignation effective immediately, asking me to see Miss Keller in the front office for my time. This was an obvious ruse to get me out of the room so she could talk to Mr. Parker alone in an effort to get him to reconsider for the sake of "your people." What transpired beyond that I don't know other than the fact that Mr. Parker consented only to think it over until Saturday.

In the meantime, I waited for Mr. Parker in the front office where I was joined a short time later by Mr. Lutz, who on his own initiative told me that I ought to reconsider ~~me~~ for the sake of the playground program. I told him that the issue was bigger than that and expressed the opinion that if Miss Tennant had the sort of social philosophy that a person in her position ought to have, she would encourage Mr. Parker's and my stand. He agreed, but stated that he didn't think our actions would have any bearing on the swimming pool situation (he himself was obviously out of sympathy with the undemocratic regulation barring Negroes). I brought our discussion to a close by stating that although I would miss the children, I had ~~broken away from~~ ^{become alienated - to some of} my family because of their racial ~~pr~~ intolerance, and that I had no hesitancy about breaking away from the playground. He left wishing me luck.

Some minutes later, Mr. Parker and Miss Tennant emerged and went into Mr. Lewis' office; I was invited ~~it~~ in and joined them.

Mr. Lewis gave a long, wordy account with much repetition about how the Urban League was started under the initiative of the Recreation Department (incidentally, this is untrue). He then had the gall to state that the Negroes actually had more facilities for recreation than anyone else because of the Urban League Center... He also mumbled something about how many Negroes were his friends and how well he got along with them...and about how broadminded he was. I interrupted with the remark that

all the segregated recreation facilities were nothing more than conscience salves, and that they had nothing to do with the swimming pool situation.

He replied with a sharp, "No, I wouldn't say that," and continued with the opinion that he was interested in keeping harmony, that he didn't want to hurt anybody's feelings, and that he didn't want to put the Negro in a position where he might be insulted (Gad, what greater insult is there than that!?) I answered that all the anticipated trouble was purely hypothetical and was about to cite the cases of other communities where racial tensions are even more severe having mixed swimming facilities with no trouble, but was interrupted by a wild roar from him accusing me of trying to stir up trouble while he was trying to avoid it. And then he took a peculiar stand: Keeping his voice raised to an angry roar, he said in effect: You can't say anything; you wrote those letters without telling us; that wasn't playing fair with us. Naturally I defended my position replying that I had every right in the world to my views and to the expression of said views and added that Miss Tennant's attitude on July 12 left me with no alternative consistent with my convictions; I also stated ~~in~~ perhaps with more heat than I should have that ~~It certainly was~~ the trouble already existed in the undemocratic negative policy and that I certainly was interested in making trouble -- not for its own sake, but with the idea of correcting the situation. But he wouldn't listen to me, only shouting over and over that I hadn't played fair.

Thereafter he went on in the vein that he was profoundly liberal on the race question ~~that~~ but that other people would object (it's always other people; I haven't seen an honestly prejudice person yet)...He even went so far as to admit that maybe it was wrong to keep the pool closed to colored participants and openly admitted that it was a violation of the law, but all the time he prevented me from saying anything by raising his voice in an obvious effort to browbeat me; knowing he wouldn't listen, I heard him out, although bored at his repetitiveness and disgusted at his rudeness. He finally finished and Mr. Parker and I left.

I did not forget to wash my hands -- I'd shaken his hand when I entered his office.

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Findings: Mr. Lewis is extremely political in the worst non-Aristotelian sense of the word. He is afraid of what he calls "trouble." At the same time, he regards me as a trouble maker. The implication is that if our side creates a greater degree of "trouble" for their not opening the pool than can be caused by their opening the pool, he would switch his stand.