

Quiet change happened 'restaurant by restaurant'

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Marvin Griffin is an impressive man. But he didn't have what it took to sidle up to the Piccadilly cafeteria line. What that took, in 1961, was white skin.

The Waco pastor was told "we can't serve you." So he calmly left. And kept coming back.

Arthur Fred Joe was an agitator proudly so. He invested much shoe leather as a picketer bringing attention to Jim Crow accommodations in this city, his city.

Over several tense years, they and many other Waco African-Americans managed to force the issue of segregated public accommodations.

One of the fascinating stories about their struggle is how they had the backing and support of some of Waco's most powerful figures household names in town like McCall, Kultgen, Provence. It's just that the town didn't know it.

But the restaurant owners knew it. And they understood what it meant. It meant times were changing, ready or not.

Marvin Griffin has been away from Waco for 35 years. He was pastor of New Hope Baptist Church here for 18 years. Now, at 82, he pastors at the Ebenezer Third Baptist Church in Austin.

When blacks decided to force the issue on public accommodations, they never imagined that before long they would have some of Waco's biggest establishment figures in their corner.

Initially, one of the key confrontations involved picketing an East Waco convenience store. Griffin remembers recruiting from his congregation. After a week, they won the battle. Arthur Joe was one of the key activists not afraid to target a business through peaceful demonstration.

But ultimate success would have been much slower and more grudging had it not been for the fact that over at the Chamber of Commerce, knowing heads noticed a change in the wind. The chamber formed an Inter-Racial Sub-Committee actually a misnomer because it was all-white. Its role, however, was to interact with a group of black leaders like Griffin. Its goal: to avert the strife and race riots that visited other southern towns.

Griffin may have been suspicious, but from the mouths of these leaders came reassuring words.

Of the imperative to desegregate Waco businesses, he recalled Baylor University President Abner McCall saying: "Well, Baylor is opening up. (Baylor dropped its own color barrier in 1961.) We don't have to do it. You can't make us do it. We're doing it because it's the right thing to do."

Essentially, the committee vowed to work toward convincing Waco restaurants to serve blacks.

Joe L. Ward Jr., former Waco mayor and head of the Inter-Racial Committee, remembers the quiet diplomacy that ensued. Members would contact an individual business and convince it to open service to blacks. Then they would set up a designated time and would have the blacks select a family to show up and, without fanfare, demolish a tradition.

In that manner, said Ward, the committee went "restaurant by restaurant. After a while it kind of fell in place."

This was front-page, history-book news. And one of the members of the committee was Harry Provence, then editor of this newspaper. But not a word was printed of it, because quiet was of the essence.

"The less publicity, the greater the possibility of success," Ward said.

Ultimately all that remained were businesses that weren't amenable to such diplomacy. Piccadilly Cafeteria, which had ownership out of state, continued to resist. But blacks kept coming back, along with white supporters like businessman Nathan Hoffman, who first told me of this story.

Finally Piccadilly relented. Arthur Joe broke the news to Griffin.

"We were delighted. We rejoiced in the fact that they finally yielded and were willing to do the right thing."

But the restaurant really had no choice. They kept coming back.