

NOT IN MY BACKYARD: FACING UP TO PAST INJUSTICES

I grew up in a stable St. Paul neighborhood, extending westward from Ayd Mill Road to the Mississippi River Blvd. and delineated by Summit and Randolph Avenues to the north and south respectively. Home to about 19,000 residents, by all accounts the **Macalester-Groveland** neighborhood of Saint Paul is a welcoming middle to upper middle-class enclave with a respectable reputation. We played outside after dinner, never giving thought to anything bad happening. Neighbors generally interacted amiably and freely with one another, though like many neighborhoods, differences appeared in the form of political lawn signs every other year. Today, it is predominantly Caucasian (87%) with a median household income of \$77,587. Home values are actually double the average of the city of Saint Paul, so it is a bit pricy. And taxes...well, that's for another column!

But when I came across an article in the **Ramsey County Historical Society** magazine, to which I subscribe, I was pretty taken back. After all, the article was about **my neighborhood**. Just behind the alley of my all-time favorite local business, **Regina Candies**, (corner of at Saint Clair and Cleveland Ave.), stands a house on a typical 40-foot lot that I soon learned has had a sad past. The Ramsey County Interactive Map (source of endless entertainment looking up parcels!) indicates that the house was built in 1924. In March of 1925, a graduate of St. Paul College of Law (today Mitchell Hamline) by the name of **William T. Francis** and his wife **Nellie**, sought to purchase the newly constructed home. However, when word got out, despite his decades long resume of public service, the couple was summarily asked to reconsider their purchase. And then, it got even worse.

Seventy-five people gathered a block away at Groveland School and voted in a resolution with an additional 300 people signing a petition to the same effect. The hastily organized denizens called themselves the “Cretin Improvement Association” and their actions that night cast an historical pall on what I believe to be an idyllic neighborhood. Why were Mr. Francis and his wife Nellie asked to reconsider? One reason, and one reason only—they were African-American. What was the resolution? Quite bluntly, it stated that “colored persons are **not wanted** in the district.” The newly formed association even requested police protection for a **group of cross burners** and authorized money to “provide horns, a brass band and torchlight perceptions to carry out the plan” effectively attempting to force the couple to back out of the sale.

Mr. Francis, a successful and mild-mannered gentleman active in local and state Republican politics, was hoping one day to receive a diplomatic appointment. As an official elector, he had cast his vote for **President Warren Harding** in the 1920 Presidential election. A few years later, however, Francis felt compelled in conscience to write against some views expressed in Harding's 1921 speech in Birmingham. While Harding declared that American democracy required that African American citizens enjoy equal political rights, he also said something else in that speech with which Francis vehemently disagreed. President Harding spoke of a “fundamental difference between the white and black race” believing that this difference should not be breached. William Francis saw this as a **prelude to segregation** and spoke out against it. Sadly, it probably torpedoed any chance he had of a diplomatic appointment from the President.

All evidence indicates that Mr. Francis was mild-mannered and generally speaking, non-controversial. And yet in this tree-lined burgeoning neighborhood in which homes were springing up left and right, residents began to “invite” them to leave. When they declined, the next night a burning cross appeared at the property. So too did a flair appear at the home of the man who had sold them the house. Then on November 1, 1925, approximately 200 people roamed the neighborhood armed with **horns and noisemaking** devices. The couple was undeterred. The neighborhood organization even offered the couple **\$1,000 to give up** their house, the equivalent of approximately \$14,000 in 2019 dollars. In 1927, Francis finally received the diplomatic posting he desired, appointed by President Coolidge as U.S. Minister to Liberia. The couple never returned to Saint Paul. He died in 1929 from complications after having contracted malaria.

This past November the USCCB issued a pastoral letter on racism entitled “Open Wide our Hearts,” lost amidst all the coverage of the halted discussion on accountability for bishops. It is well worth reading. It states: “Racism arises when—either consciously or unconsciously—a person holds that his or her own race or ethnicity is

superior, and therefore judges persons of other races or ethnicities as inferior and unworthy of equal regard.” Nine decades removed, it was still hard to read this account without having a **visceral reaction**. I would never have imagined that a cross burning took place in **my own neighborhood**. While this 94-year-old incident is not reflective of pervasive racism, it sheds light on the history, culture and mores of the day. History is an ever-instructive tool for the present. In confronting our painful past, we strive to learn from past mistakes, building a more just and virtuous society, imbued with the Gospel of Jesus.

- She’s at it again. **U.S. Rep. Ilhan Omar** (D-MN 5th district) has a tweeting problem. First, it was the Covington Catholic boys, and now it is Jewish Americans. She was excoriated rather quickly for her latest anti-Israel (i.e. anti-Semitic) tweet. Unlike her scurrilous false tweet about the Covington boys, this time she offered an apology. I vividly recall a veteran priest bluntly advising me as a new priest in 1989: “Keep your mouth shut at priest meetings for five years, until you gain some experience and credibility.” Best.Advice.Ever!
- Spring is coming early this year...at least in terms of Lemon Pies. Due to a later Easter and April/May Confirmation schedules, the annual **Lemon Pie Sale** will take place on **Sunday February 24** after the morning Masses. This is one of my favorite events of the year. The “secret” recipe is for the ages!
- Ninety years ago last week, the Kingdom of Italy (and Prime Minister Benito Mussolini) and the Holy See ended years of tension. The **Lateran Treaty** established the Vatican City State as a self-governing state, along with financial payments for lands seized from the Papal States. The Vatican gave up all claims. The 108-acre city state also includes several properties granted **extraterritorial status**, meaning that though spread out throughout Rome, when one sets foot inside certain churches or buildings, you have technically crossed an international boundary.
- Presidents of Episcopal Conferences across the globe will gather with Pope Francis from Feb. 21-24 to address “The Protection of Minors in the Church” and the proper episcopal response. I think it is fair to say that the world is watching. May frank dialogue lead to systemic change and real accountability. Please pray that, guided by the promptings of the Holy Spirit, our Shepherds will hear the voices of the faithful and rebuild trust in the Church.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel
Rector