

Part Two: On Integrating a Southern Catholic high school

This is continued from last week.

The students in Charleston had a different way of life. Some of the boys actually drove the school buses. Many of the students had cars and during the warm months, surf boards were attached to the top of the cars. After school, the kids headed for the restrooms and returned to their cars in surfing attire. Strangely, Bishop England did not have a cafeteria. The seniors were allowed off campus for lunch. The underclassmen ate their lunch in the gym using the bleachers for both table and chair. The coaches supervised the lunch period.

Another memory of Bishop England was the football season.

Rivalry was strong and rotten eggs played a vital part in that rivalry. One morning I arrived at school to find the statue of Bishop England covered with rotten eggs. Of course our students crossed the river and returned the compliment on the campus of our competitor.

A vivid memory of my days at Bishop England was the passing through of the Poor People's Campaign. The group used Charleston as a rest stop while headed to Washington. At the same time, there was political friction between the black workers and the Medical College Hospital. The issue was equal pay. In Baltimore, the riots were routine.

When the Poor People's Campaign crossed the Ashley River and entered Charleston, dear Bishop Ernest Unterkoefler was there to greet them. He marched with the group into the city. Many people did not approve of his actions, but I thought it was a Christian thing to do.

While the campaign was in Charleston, the participants were housed mostly in Protestant church halls. No Catholic organization housed anyone. Bishop England claimed that people walking on the floor of the gym would ruin the basketball court.

Our convent, St. Katharine, named after Mother Katharine Drexel who funded the convent, had as guests six ladies who slept on cots in the front room. We cooked breakfast for the group and transported them to their appointed destination.

Every night there was a gathering and a rally. The white residents claimed that foreign attitudes were invading their territory. One night Jesse Jackson was the speaker and announced to the crowd and press that he was not a foreigner, but a local boy coming home.

The city placed a curfew on the city. Everyone was to be off the streets by a certain hour. There were buses lined up to take people who broke the curfew to jail. One of the officers was the father of one of my students; he begged me not to break the curfew. Of course, I made up my own mind. One night the group did decide to break the curfew. We marched from the church, past the Citadel and then disbanded. No arrests were made and that was the end of the curfew.

Father Kelly told me that he wished I would not be part of the demonstrations, but I reminded Father that after 3 p.m. my time was my own. There were no hard feelings, and life went on as usual.

The director of Catholic Charities and the three Franciscans from Milwaukee, along with the Oblate Sisters, were the only religious to take part in the demonstrations. In the meantime, the Poor People's Campaign championed the cause of the workers from the Medical College Hospital. In the end, the dispute concerning equal pay was solved. The next year the two schools integrated without fanfare.

My experience at Bishop England taught me to be myself wherever I am. My two years at the school also taught me not to prejudge situations. I was told some things to expect in a newly integrated Southern environment. None of the predictions became a reality. In conclusion, I must say that I thoroughly enjoyed my two-year stay in the charming city of Charleston.

Sister M. Reginald Gerdes, O.S.P., is a historian for the Oblate Sisters of Providence.