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SECTIONS
Front Page
News
Sports
Lifestyle
Entertainment
Business
Religion
Technology
Community
Classroom
Opinion
• Editorials
• Insight
• Letters
• Cartoons
• Books
Columns
Obituaries
Almanac
Classifieds
ISSUES
Iraq
PCBs
Incineration
McClellan
Message Board
SEARCH
Search Archives:
<input type="text"/> <input type="button" value="Go"/>
Browse Articles
Web Directory
DIRECTORIES
Star Homes
Local Churches
Local Businesses
SERVICES
Get The Star
Advertise
About Us
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Terms of Use
Privacy Policy
FUN & GAMES
Crossword
Jigsaw
Puzzle Society
Make Me Smile
WEATHER

EDITORIALS

Brandt Ayers: Days of ... segregated books

09-21-2003

We talked frankly with great good nature at the local library about the city we love: How it hurt and humiliated some of us and how, in the end, our city achieved a degree of peace unusual for the South of the time.



The talk centered on a Sunday afternoon 40 years ago when a white mob attacked the Revs. N. Q. Reynolds and Bob McClain on their way to Carnegie library, the same day four little girls were eviscerated in Sunday School dresses at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham.

The gathering was inspired by the publication of a book, Beyond The Burning Bus, by a heroic figure of the time, the Rev. Dr. J. Phillips Noble, then pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Anniston.

As we talked a world came into view that might as well be fictional, so alien was it to the world in which the conversations took place. It did exist. I was born to that civilization; grew up in it thinking it was normal.

That world was being deconstructed during the time of the "library incident." A series of events from the integration of the Armed Forces to the Brown decision to the sit-ins and Freedom Rides had given hope, the trigger of action, that a new world was aborning.

Those were the days when civil rights clashed with civil resistance and a whole "way of life" was undergoing violent death throes. A thunder-clap of local violence had struck a Freedom Rider bus here in 1961. Into that social maelstrom, the two ministers calmly walked to the library with active support of white leadership — risking death, as it turned out.

I was shocked when I learned about the mob attack at the U.S. Justice Department, part of my beat as a Washington correspondent.

Violence at the library? I thought. Not Carnegie Library. That's where we went to gawk at the bird collection and stare respectfully at the Egyptian mummy. That's the dark, quiet place where starchy sweet, ageless Miss Mildred Goodrich read to children in "The Poet's Corner."

For the good people who so lovingly used the library, for the chosen, the leaders, the knights of noblesse oblige, it was a crime against civilization. The barbarians had defiled a hallowed place.

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Search



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As we talked all day last Saturday of that long ago time, of small humiliations and great crimes, of black adventurers and white discoverers, of black and white heroes, and white villains, we were all comfortable with each other. We were at ease because we were describing a time and place so distant from today's reality, it might as well be in a novel.



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Incineration Video
 REAL WMP

Back then, none of Bob McClain's white Methodist colleagues would receive him, so the journey of the Revs. McClain and Reynolds to meet Phil Noble at First Presbyterian was to a foreign country.

VIDEO



Flawed Intelligence

At least they knew how to get to First Presbyterian. At the second meeting, Phil Noble realized there was a continental divide within one small town — he did not know where 17th Street Baptist Church was located.



A MASTER PLAN TO RECOVER
SPECIAL REPORT

The ministerial astronauts exploring each other's strange planets were followed by an act of rare political bravery. Miller Sproull, in his 1962 campaign for the City Commission called for the creation of a biracial Human Relations Council.



HABITAT FOR HUMANITY INTERNATIONAL WORK PROJECT
HABITAT

The creation of the Council was so unusual in the Deep South that President Kennedy wrote the Commission, "Your action is a sensible one, and one that should serve as a model for the United States."



CASUALTIES OF WAR
SLIDE SHOW

In the turbulent years that followed the flight of the black astronauts, there were civil rights and KKK marches, there were black protests against hiring discrimination and white man's rallies at one of which the Rev. Connie Lynch advocated murdering Negroes "in the name of Jesus Christ."



Feels Like Fall
GALLERY

After every indignity and atrocity committed and borne, civic white knights mobilized the white community to oppose the hooligans, showing resolve in hundreds of recognizable names signed to full-page statements.



The New Star BUILDING TOUR

It astonishes to look back from the 21st century and see the scale by which progress was measured in the early 1960s. The stealth and drama and peril and pain that it took — to integrate books?



MAKE ME SMILE


No jangling false notes jarred the comfort we all felt with each other as we talked about old days in that other civilization. We could be at ease because we had reached out to each other and liked what we had become.

About Brandt Ayers:

H. Brandt Ayers is the publisher of The Anniston Star and chairman of Consolidated Publishing Co. His column appears on Sundays in the Insight section.

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