

THE CO Reactor

Paul Azevedo



1/28/80 An Incident That Is Refreshing

When some people down south displayed their bigotry the other day, 20,000 people, some from the Bay Area, marched to oppose them. The problem of racism and such is still with us. But whenever I start to despair at the slowness of change, I remember what things were like not too many years ago.

In 1951 I was on an airplane, courtesy of the U.S. Army. It stopped in Dallas, and I discovered what White Only/Colored Only drinking fountains were.

It was in the 60's (or perhaps even in the early 70's) that a well-known housebuilder in this area (Not Andy Oddstad or Henry Doelger) avoided selling houses in Daly City to Blacks, and for all I know, other minorities as well.

That's why I found it so refreshing the other day when a local politician was accused of being racist. It was not just that he probably isn't a racist, (he probably isn't), but the incident wasn't reported because the conclusion was that calling someone a racist might well be libelous.

Isn't that great? I think it is. It hasn't been many years that some people might have considered it a compliment to be called a racist and a bigot. Lord knows there are some of those still around, up in Idaho and some other places. But they are generally considered extremists, weirdos, and kooks.

Today it is so shameful to be considered a bigot or a racist, in other words, that the average man who accuses another man of that trait is in danger of being sued for slander or libel. That's as it should be.

It proves we have progressed. We still have some distance to go, but that's always true of a long trip over difficult terrain. In any such trip, there are bound to be stragglers, those who balk at the obstacles or become the obstacles.

100 years ago Mexican immigrants to San Francisco were writing home to complain about the "problem" of the Chinese. "Those foreigners" were competing for jobs, and something would have to be done about them. Letters in the files of the Bancroft Library in Berkeley from such migrants prove that racial division was not confined to the Irish, the German and the English-descended Americans, but was practically universal.

One hundred years ago the Chinese and the Italians (among others, of course) often could not speak English. The lack of understanding was mutual. Right here in this area, the census was taken on the isolated ranches by lining up the farm hands, arranging them rather arbitrarily by estimated age, and counting off, "Italian number one to Italian number five, 40 years old, Italian number 6 through 16, 35 years old..." and so on.

No wonder there was so much ethnic division. When few people understand each other's language, there is likely to be a lot of bickering or worse. A melting pot can get pretty hot, you know.

Let's be grateful that in this city, at least, we have comparatively little racial friction. That was less true in the past, but the goal of racial harmony gets closer by the day, thanks to a lot of good people who are doing their best to make it so.