

L.A. CONFIDENTIAL

By STANLEY G. ROBERTSON

Column of Notes, Opinions, Etc.

Nice letter from Mr. Ted Johnson, who has lived in Los Angeles since 1927, and who enjoys our "Do You Remember When?" columns. Wants more of them. Here's one for you, Mr. Johnson!

Do you remember when there was a disastrous brush fire in Griffith Park and a group of black WPA workmen, who were working on a reclamation project in the park, were trapped and killed? I think the year was 1933 and more than two dozen of the men working in the area were killed.

Another one, Mr. Johnson:

Do you remember when it rained so hard and so steadily in Los Angeles that police and the called-out national guard utilized rowboats and canoes to ferry people across most of the streets in the old town? The year was 1938 and approximately 100 lives were lost.

A few more:

Do you remember when Al Duval was a star tackle for Loyola University and the Lions were big time and playing schools like Santa Clara, St. Mary's, and University of San Francisco, who were also big time? Duval was a hero to every black kid because it was a time when USC had no black players and Kenny Washington and Woody Strode hadn't emerged on the Westwood scene at UCLA.

Do you remember when there were only two places for black kids to swim on the Eastside—the Twenty-eighth Street YMCA pool and Twenty-second Street pool—and there were still well-to-do whites who lived in the area around what was then 41st (now 43rd) and Central Ave. who sent their kids to private schools?

When Lincoln Park was the place to go and show off your Easter finery and, periodically, white representatives of movie studios would drive around the Central Ave. area looking for "native types" for the latest Tarzan feature?

When the Second World War started and, because of manpower shortages and pressures from the community, the old Los Angeles Railway System, affectionately known as LARY, hired its first Negro conductors and drivers and one newspaper columnist for a now-defunct daily paper predicted, "There'll be riots in the streets. Whites won't accept them (Negroes) to drive them to work"? He was so wrong!

When the "prettiest" Negro girls in town worked as elevator operators at either Saks Fifth Avenue on Wilshire or at Bullock's Downtown — and if you were pretty and dark brown, you better not apply because you had to be "high yeller" to qualify?

And, More of the Same

When there was a man named Walter Goodlowe in the black community whose work with kids as a police officer, and with the many social and fraternal groups with which he was associated, made this a better town in which to live? Walter died tragically a few years ago and he is really missed by a lot of people.

When little Dorothy Gordon, kidnaped and ravished on her way to Easter play rehearsal, was found months later, her skeletal body stuffed into a storm drain? The Negro community was up in arms and tensions mounted toward the city's first racial riot when it was rumored that her killer was white. He was never found nor was it ever proven that he was white. The year: 1940!

When the reigning black ladies of the American stage and films — Hattie McDaniel, Louise Beavers, and Ethel Waters — all lived within blocks of one another near the intersection of Western and Adams in the area which was known as Sugar Hill? The war was on and what had at one time been an area of well-to-do whites became the classiest black residential area in town.

When every black kid wanted to grow up to be like Henry Armstrong, who held three boxing titles and everywhere he went on Central Ave. he was followed by people just wanting to touch him and get his autograph? Armstrong was a man who had class and who, different from some of the sports and entertainment heroes of today, had a reputation of being kind to the fans who supported him.

When they tried to bring professional basketball to the West Coast long before the advent of the National Basketball Assn. and they used to play at the old Olympic Auditorium or at the Shrine Auditorium? Jackie Robinson was one of the stars of the ill-fated venture. The year: 1946.

When there was a place on 43rd and Central Ave. called Finley's which featured the best chili around and you could catch all the "sports" and "players" in the place late at night when the booze-serving places closed and the "girls" were out working? It is reported by a guy who used to work there that he personally noted a "very large hustling type gentleman of the period" being handed \$5,000 by one of his "working ladies."

When Brother's and the Flame were after-hours places until Sonny Tufts brought national note to them when he got into a police-calling altercation in one with a lady from this side of the tracks? Those were the days when the town was so wide open that the only thing you needed to operate whatever you wanted to was enough bread to grease the right wheels.

And, Do You Remember . . .

When Dinah Washington used to shout the blues at the old 5-4 Ballroom on South Broadway and when Dinah was shouting, you could hear the greats of the time: Lowell Fulson, Percy Mayfield, Big Boy Arthur Crudup, and so many more? There was no "dress code" and you'd see guys wearing everything from bib overalls to tuxedos and if you had a thin skin the 5-4 wasn't the place for you. The year: 1955, give or take a year or so.

When local police were looking for what they believed to be a pair of black father-and-son bandits because one of the culprits, in ordering patrons at the shop they were holding up to line up, said to his partner: "Okay, Daddy, you go to work now"?

Somebody had to pull the cops' coats as the black community laughed at the blue coats going for the expression which had not become part of the language as yet. The year: 1941.

The Final Reel

And, do you remember when they used to play the inter-frat basketball games at old Patriotic Hall on Figueroa and one of those who starred for the Kappa Red and White was a guy named Tom Bradley?

See what happens when you start reminiscing, Mr. Johnson?