

THE DIE IS CAST

"Who? Me? Of course I've done my fair share to help the Negro. I've contributed to the Community chest; I don't have any trouble tolerating one if he happens to sit next to me in a restaurant; I defend their rights in discussions with my friends; and, well, I know some really great Negroes!"

And then, even with all these well meaning folk living in Milwaukee and vicinity, last summer just what we thought couldn't happen, did happen here! People were killed and injured; millions of dollars worth of homes and businesses were destroyed; factories were closed down; people were confined to their homes; the National Guard was called up; and people asked why, why did it happen here?

As a senior in high school, I certainly cannot pretend to know the complete answer to that question - - even President Johnson's National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders delved into the problem and came up with nothing tangible - - no simple solution. But I do believe that even from the ignorance and inexperience of youth something may be learned--something worth thinking about. Tonight I want to relate some of the incidents that have molded my opinion about "why it happened here."

One of the greatest snocks of my life came some two years ago on a bus trip with forty other youth from Wauwatosa. As I looked out the window into the darkness of a small town in Tennessee, a sign on the front of a rundown, dilapidated laundromat caught my eye. Whites Only it read. Suddenly I understood that the prejudice one reads about in such books as To Kill a Mockingbird and Black Like Me really exists. From that time on I burned inside everytime I heard anyone, even jokingly, talking derisively about the Negro-- for I felt that I had seen what it might lead to. But I hadn't seen half of it!

On the same trip we visited a day school in Chattanooga, Tennessee for underprivileged Negro children whose parents worked during the day. As we call quite innocently played with these children in the school yard-- they were, at that age, as "color-blind" as we were trying to be-- a middle aged white man stopped his car next to our bus and shouted to the driver, "What are all those white kids doing playing with those filthy niggers? They'll just grow up to give us a peck 'a trouble some day." Again we were shocked, disillusioned, and disgusted--especially as we looked up to the magnificent monuments directly above us on Lookout Mountain-- monuments to a war that was supposed to have ended all this.

If I had to cite one specific situation that most undermined my faith in American society, I would draw it from the same trip. On two consecutive nights we stayed with groups in Memphis, Tennessee, and in Natchez Mississippi. In Memphis we were welcomed with open arms. The Negro youth group cooked and served us supper (something we had been accustomed to doing ourselves) provided group entertainment; and stayed until quite late (even though the next day was a

school day for them) to talk, play ping pong, chess and cards and provide us with a great and rewarding time. This was only a few weeks after Martin Luther King had been brutally murdered in Memphis. I can't believe that our hosts were wholly motivated by a selfish intent to "make a good impression"-- they couldn't have been so consistent in hospitality. Never have I seen a greater group of practicing Christians.

The next night, in Natchez, we stayed in a "White Church." The youth made an effort to be friendly, but they were distant, "cliquish", and every thought, every idea, was guarded. Perhaps my memory would be a bit sweeter, though, if it hadn't been for one well-meaning Southern gal who, in showing me her school yearbook, pointed out a certain printer's error. The hourglass, the symbol of the class, had been printed black with a white background in some cases and white with black background in others. The reason, she innocently pointed out, was probably because "we got some of them blackies in our school this year." With just as much innocence I cited my experience of the previous night, but I found immediately that we no longer had a common ground for discussion. I was thoroughly disgusted, but as I see it now, I should have been sorry that she was brought up by parents who judge character according to skin color.

There is one point that I would like to clarify: I do not judge all whites and all Negroes by the examples I have related to you tonight. They served to illustrate to me the magnitude of the problem that we will have to face in the near future--as I hope they have also done for you. To judge everyone by these incidents would be to fall into a horrible trap that is perhaps at the bottom of the whole situation. The Irish, the Italians, and the Germans were all at one time or another rejected by our society--but, obviously, they have been quite well assimilated. One might then assume that in due time the Negro will follow the same course--but there is one fundamental difficulty. Whenever a mob of Irishmen or Italians attacked someone or set fire to something the blame was put on both them and the whole Irish or Italian community--a basic injustice in itself. The same is true of the Negro, but the similarity stops there. One can become a good friend of an Italian or an Irishman before one learns the man's nationality. Not so with the Negro--the fact that he has a dark skin classifies him with the hoodlums that one saw maybe ten years before, and distrust is immediate. Just as many people have been mugged by lawless whites as have been by Negroes--and yet we don't generally avoid Caucasians. We would have no problem with prejudice if we all suddenly became colorblind in a special sense.

There will always be Stokely Carmichaels and H. Rap Browns by which we could judge the whole Negro population, just as, unfortunately, there will always be Bobby Bakers and Jimmy Hoffas by which the Negro population could judge us. The Negro revolution was once a non-violent revolution aimed at legitimate demands. Today it is drifting to violence and its own brand of prejudice as a means of waking up white America.

It certainly looks as if we were losing the fight against our own prejudice.

The only solution to our problem lies in the possibility that level-headed whites and level-headed Negroes--and there are many of both types--could get together and drop the reins of prejudice and generalization that are binding us ever tighter. We call ourselves a predominantly Christian nation, and Christianity emphasizes the goodness of the individual--not of the race. Why can't we all stop being hypocrites for once and follow the ideals we have been telling ourselves we believe in? When will we become human beings instead of Blacks and Whites.

So, you say, this idealism is all well and good, but what are some practical, affirmative programs we can become involved with in Menomonee Falls? There are many possibilities--and if one listens to the prejudices and misconceptions of one's classmates and one's neighbors it becomes increasingly obvious that something is sorely needed here in our secure little community of Menomonee Falls. Just in the schools there are countless things we could do to improve the situation. Many of the children of our community have no other conception of the black man than the twisted view they see on the 6 o'clock news. One might hire well-qualified Negro teachers--and there are some. One might incorporate a more extensive course on Negro history--fully explaining the many contributions Negroes have made to our country--into our current U. S. History program. The new psychology course could provide an excellent springboard for a study of the roots of prejudice. A more extensive program with Milwaukee's inner city schools should be developed--a program which was started this year when Mark Cocroft, a great guy that I met at Badgers Boy's State, came from Lincoln High School for a day to talk to our Contemporary History Classes. He was very well received, and I believe taught us a great deal--more of the same is certainly in order. For the community? Why not exchange programs between local church and civic groups with groups from the inner city? Why not a group from the Falls (to supplement the Milwaukee program) to tutor underprivileged Negro children? The possibilities are endless, and we must do something--something to combat an ever worsening situation.

One of the choices for our class motto was "the die is cast." but has it really been? I sincerely hope not, for if it has been cast, if prejudice is permanently instilled in our being, our society will crumble in the strife of the future. As we of the class of 1968 graduate tonight, we will be faced with the age old problem of prejudice--a problem that could ruin our country. God grant that we may cope with it.