

Sluggish Memphis Still Dreaming Of A 'Prom

By MICHAEL LOLLAR
From Cotton Row and the Mid-America Mall above, the Mississippi River bluffs, down the boarded-up remains of Beale Street and into the sprawling suburb, the dream of a "promised land" remains a dream in Memphis.

A decade since the jolt of a sniper's bullet felled Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. here, as cities throughout the South look inward at their progress and their failures, Memphis and Memphians speak of a growing rapport between blacks and whites. Politically and through labor organization, blacks have unified and have a greater voice.

But the cadence is slow, and progress in attitudes and in so many other areas has been so slight that Memphis now counts among its priority problems its ailing downtown, its desegregating public school system and its failure to attract high-wage industry for its large, unskilled labor force.

In the 10 years since 1968, white flight from Memphis schools has weaved a new patchwork of black-white housing patterns across the city, the county and even across the Mississippi River, threatening to leave the public school system 85 per cent black by 1980.

Downtown and Beale Street, victims of suburban shopping, had been declining before 1968. King's violent death, a few blocks from Beale in the heart of downtown, and the marches and riots that preceded and followed the fatal bullet in the midst of a bitter sanitation strike made the declines more obvious and may have contributed.

It was a psychological bomb, steering investors away from downtown and from redevelopment of Beale, says Mrs. Gwen Awwsb, former city councilman and now director of the city's Housing and Community Development Division. "Customers of the downtown area fled in droves after the sanitation marches. It just went. It was a combination of fear, distaste and avoiding any possibility of violence."

The sanitation strike lasted 65 days. The Tennessee National Guard spent 21 days in the city, and Tennessee Adj. Gen. Carl Wallace, information officer for the state during the call-up of 8,000 troops here, says it was "the biggest single call-out in Tennessee history at the time." Dusk-to-dawn curfews halted most of the window breaking and looting, but there was sniper fire downtown and in heavily black areas of North and South Memphis.

Wallace says it has remained a closely guarded secret since after King's murder the U.S. Army chief of staff dispatched 16,000 federal troops to Memphis. "But Governor Ellington found out about it. He called President Johnson and told him we didn't need any federal troops in Tennessee, that we could handle it on our own. The troops were turned around in mid-air."

There was only one death in Memphis, a 17-year-old black youth shot by police. Other cities suffered more. Before King's funeral, riots, firebombings and violence had left 10 dead in Chicago, 6 in Washington, 2 in Detroit and 1 in Tallahassee, Fla. More than 700 were injured in Washington, more than 200 in Chicago. Property damage in Washington was estimated at \$10 million.

Beale Street in Memphis was the most heavily damaged. Merchants in other parts of downtown did not leave immediately.

Glen Gilbreath, district manager of the Piccadilly Cafeteria, blames the eventual exodus on Henry Ford. "In all honesty I think he caused the whole thing when he developed the automatic starter. It permitted women to drive cars and to their shopping in the suburban malls that were springing up."

Memphis is now at a crossroads, its leaders say. But they and their subjects have not given up. There is the new Mid-America Mall, city loans to help create a new Beale Street and to help restore the legendary Peabody Hotel. There is Libertyland. And a new amusement park is rising from Mud Island at the city's riverfront doorstep.

To some, those elements will help Memphis to rise during another decade. To others, those same elements are cosmetic, failing to deal with the attitudes that, despite better rapport, still divide schools and housing and, in turn, help repel new industry.

Reciting a common theme in his hometown, Benjamin L. Hooks, executive director of the NAACP, says that Memphis tolerated only so much. Its lunch counters, city buses, drinking fountains and restrooms were desegregated by the early '60s. "Those battles were over by 1968. If one looks at attitudes, they reached a certain maximum, and they haven't changed."

"We've gone back in the area of school

integration, economics and downtown, which is worse off. I don't know of any area that has made progress unless it's political. . . . In housing, we may have gone backward. Certainly, there are no patterns of integration in the housing."

Mayor Wyeth Chandler, a leader in the fight against the city's first school busing orders in 1972, had inherited his 1971 victory at the polls from a Memphis whose leadership legacy was closely identified with either racism or outright manipulation of blacks as in the days of E. H. "Boss" Crump. Chandler, who plans to run for mayor again, says the city has "come a long way," even in attitudes from the Crump days and the days of the "Henry Loeb type guy."

Despite the recession that Chandler mentions and the city's failure to attract industry, he says the "climate" for change has improved. He points to a better decade ahead. As for the lessons of the last 10 years, including the sanitation strike, King's happenstance murder here and school busing:

"Anytime that type of thing occurs, people tend to look inward and say, 'Is it something that I have done that has led to this? And I think in a fashion even when they found that they were at fault and found it was a bad situation that this deep gulf between the races continued to exist.'"

Chandler says he has mellowed. "I've met a lot more blacks, have more respect for blacks. There are a lot of outstanding blacks in this city."

He describes 1978 attitudes in his city as "sad commentary," usually unspoken.

"If you went out here and looked into the heat and asked, 'Do you love blacks more 10 years after King was killed and you didn't get their words, just their thoughts somehow conveyed to you through telepathy, they'd be saying, 'Hell, no.'"

Henry Loeb, the former mayor who fought the sanitation workers' organizing effort, now sells farm equipment in Forest City, Ark. The former mayor has appeared at rallies for farmer organization and announced himself a supporter of their efforts.

It is a stance that Rev. James L. Smith, executive director of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 1733, characterizes as "hypocritical and racist. . . . If he's for the farmers organizing, if he's for farmers getting what is right and what they deserve, why shouldn't Henry Loeb have had the same attitude about the sanitation workers in 1968?"

Smith says the sanitation workers, members of AFSCME, now feel like "human beings. . . . The way they were treated before 1968 was having a demoralizing effect on them. They were treated like nobodies. They had no job security. It gave them a bad feeling about themselves, and it had an effect on their family life that carried over to their children."

Sanitation employees, their union recognized in 1966, have moved from average wages of \$1.65 an hour to about \$4 an hour on the average during the decade. AFSCME membership has grown from 1,300 sanitation workers to 6,129 members, including hourly workers at the Memphis and Shelby County boards of education; City of Memphis, Oakville and Shelby County hospitals; Memphis Housing Authority; City Court clerk's office, and the city auto inspection station. Their organization was a forerunner to unionization of fire department, police and other public sector employees.

Memphis bluesman Furry Lewis, now 85 and retired as a sanitation worker in 1966 after 44 years, had worked for as little as 20 cents an hour in the beginning. When he retired: "It was just goody, nothing else, no pension, just a little Social Security check. I worked 44 years and worked hard as hell, and they retired me without a quarter."

There is still no pension plan, but Junior White, 43, who carried an "I Am a Man" sign in 1968, says the union "has meant a lot. Before 1968, you didn't have a choice. If they wanted you to work overtime you worked overtime. If you didn't you were fired."

It is mostly in those terms that he describes improvement, because, "I know I'm making more now, about \$4.58 an hour. But I believe it was more easy to get by then. The way the cost of living has gone up I think I don't get by as good now."

Chandler pictures the 1968 organizing effort as a classic "plantation owner vs. slaves" situation in which the slaves had the public support and won by gaining a "sense of not being out there by yourself."

The mayor, like Hooks, echoes the common theme that King's death, in itself, had little impact on the sanitation strike or Memphis unless it helped seal the fate of a

deteriorating downtown for a decade or "increased awareness and communication" between black and white leaders, but not the "entire fabric of Memphis society."

Federal Bankruptcy Judge Odell Horton, a black, describes the South as many souths and Memphis as many cities, where the "slow cadence" of progress is like an evolutionary scale in which no single event played the major role.

As a member of the Economic Club, Horton was summoned last year to a meeting in which the club would plan its 1978 program during a luncheon at a private club in Memphis. "When I arrived, the other members were standing outside. I was told that we would have to go downtown to have our meeting. On the way downtown, I was told, 'You know the reason we can't meet there is because you're black.'"

Horton recalls most of the others who adjourned with him downtown apologized profusely for what had happened. "Those members no longer 'remember' exactly what happened, but one of them explains that he decided to 'avoid the possibility of a problem' by relocating the meeting before it began."

A white acquaintance, discussing it with Horton later, said, "I thought they served niggers there," the judge quotes.

Dr. James A. Wax, retiring rabbi of Temple Israel, is "frankly optimistic about the next decade. There have been opportunities in this decade for blacks in employment working in banks and department stores and in some management positions, for example. But I think there can be much more progress in the near future."

The rabbi is disappointed "that we haven't gone further than we have. My first response would have to be that we haven't made much progress. Attitudes are pretty much the same as in 1968. There have been some changes there, but I think it is evident that the city is still pretty much polarized."

A fifth generation white Memphian, Jocelyn Wurzburg helped organize the Saturday Luncheon Club, disbanded in 1969. Mrs. Wurzburg says whites and blacks used the club as "a buffer, holding luncheons at previously segregated restaurants just to help the town get used to it so that it wouldn't be gawked at anymore."

"The most positive thing that I can say now is that it's no longer a matter of curiosity that restaurants and schools have been integrated. . . . In employment, it's a pleasure to me to be able to go into a bank or a department store and have either black or white clerks or tellers to wait on you. But I still observe tokenism."

Those who have left Memphis and re-

turn say that attitudes here are not confined to Memphis or the South. "There are some places where there's a veil over it. But you know it's there, and every place that I've been to could stand some work," says Carla Thomas, a former Stax Records Co. artist now living in Los Angeles.

"There have been a lot of new ways to cover it up, to kind of sugarcoat the issues and make them seem not so important. I can still feel a lot of prejudice in Los Angeles, too. It's in Washington, too, everywhere you go. But I really believe Memphis is making a lot more effort than in the past."

She and her father, Memphian Rufus Thomas, mourn the passing of Beale Street. Stax and the black blues that Rufus Thomas says have evolved "without the put feeling" into the hands of white musicians like Johnny Winters, Eric Clapton and English bands like the Rolling Stones. "And here we are — Memphis, the nationally recognized home of the blues. In Nashville, country and western is promoted and promoted, the same for jazz in New Orleans. It just doesn't make sense."

Thomas compares the withering blues to white flight from the schools. "There you see the basics of it."

Mrs. Maxine Smith, executive director of the Memphis Branch of the NAACP and a member of the Memphis Board of Education, is one of a growing number of city leaders to offer more than criticism of the school system, integrated by NAACP efforts but desegregating with white flight that intensified after the first school busing began in 1973.

"I don't think it has backfired. We don't have the quantity of integration we would like to have now. . . . White flight affects quantity, but I'm proud of the quality. I think the educational offering is the best it's ever been in the public schools. Those who have stayed have benefited not only from the basic skills, but what I think is the broader aspect — living with people," says Mrs. Smith.

In 1968, before the federal courts adopted school busing plans here, the city schools had 58,110 white students (47.1 per cent) and 65,170 blacks (52.9 per cent), a total of 123,280 students. Last fall, the beginning of the current school year, there were 31,754 white students (27.6 per cent) and 83,446 blacks (72.4 per cent), a total of 115,200 students.

White enrollment in private schools grew from about 15,623 in 1971 to about 32,951 last fall.

Besides the exodus to private schools, school officials trace part of the white enrollment decline in the city to white migration into Shelby County and neighboring DeSoto County in Mississippi and Critten-

den County in Arkansas. White in Shelby County schools has fallen in more than 2,000 since 1971, desegregations in which the county lost 8 students and 587 black students Dr. Willie Herenton, deputy superintendent for instructional services school system, told the Memphis Club last month. "The problem from the Memphis city school is not insurmountable. However, tensions to the school system's pro on the shoulders of the entire c. . . . It must be understood that nity can expect to thrive and p large segment of its populatio educated."

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Besides the exodus to private schools, school officials trace part of the white enrollment decline in the city to white migration into Shelby County and neighboring DeSoto County in Mississippi and Critten-

den County in Arkansas. White enrollment in Shelby County schools has increased by more than 2,000 since 1971, despite annexations in which the county lost 6,165 white students and 587 black students to the city. Dr. Willie Herenton, deputy superintendent for instructional services in the city school system, told the Memphis Rotary Club last month, "The problems that confront the Memphis city school system are not insurmountable. However, the solutions to the school system's problems rest on the shoulders of the entire community."

It must be understood that no community can expect to thrive and prosper if a large segment of its population is poorly educated."

J. D. Pope, assistant director of pupil services for the Shelby County Board of Education, says the impact of white migration on the county is "almost impossible" to gauge. "We tried to do it a couple of years ago, but we quit when we found that in the eighth grade alone we had children from 40 different states."

Real estate agents and appraisers in Memphis have learned the side streets and the new home listings in Bartlett and Germantown. "When an executive is being transferred to Memphis, the first thing he tells me is, 'Show me Germantown. If he can't afford the \$60,000 and up range, he wants to see Bartlett,'" says one agent. Within the decade, she has watched Whitehaven and Frayser, both almost exclusively white before, grow blacker and blacker. Few blacks have ventured into Bartlett and Germantown.

Vasco Smith, Shelby County Court squire, has watched his own neighborhood on South Parkway turn black. "It remains the same. When blacks move in, whites move out. Whitehaven is rapidly, very rapidly becoming black. Frayser, too. Even I had felt a little optimistic about Whitehaven with homes in the \$30,000 to \$50,000 range. I hoped it would stabilize. That makes me wonder what is going to happen in Germantown in the next 10 years."

The birth rate in Memphis and Shelby County has favored a steady gain in black population and school enrollment compared to white. Memphis and Shelby County Health Department statistics count more black births than white every year since 1972. In the five years ending eighth 1976 there were 30,278 white births and 32,780 black births in the city and county.

The 1970 Census estimated the Memphis population at 623,530, with 379,224 whites and 244,306 blacks. The figure ranked the city 17th largest in the nation, with a gain, including annexations, of 25.3 per cent from its 22nd rating in 1960. Figures from the Memphis Area Chamber of Commerce estimate a total city population at the beginning of last year at 670,000. Most sources estimate it is roughly 60 per cent white and 40 per cent black.

Unemployment statistics in each 10-year census vary with short-term changes felt across the nation. Figures from the Tennessee Department of Unemployment Security estimate minority unemployment averaged 8.1 per cent in 1970 and about 10.1 per cent in late 1976, compared to an overall unemployment rate in 1970 of about 3.3 per cent and about 6.1 per cent for 1976. Blacks accounted for less than a third of about 309,770 persons employed in Shelby County in 1976, according to those figures.

There were 21,658 applicants for unemployment insurance registered on Sept. 30, 1977. Of that total, 15,960 were minority workers.

It is not a Memphis phenomenon, but the hardest hit by unemployment are black youths. John George, area equal employment opportunity representative for the employment security department, says that a 14 per cent unemployment rate among white teenagers translates to about 50 per cent among black teenagers.

The city's large pool of unskilled and unemployed labor divides Memphis into economic camps, both agreeing that unemployed Memphians are one of the city's greatest untapped resources.

Memphis State University economist Dr. Kurt Flexner pictures the city as "moving horizontally rather than vertically. We seem to concentrate on tourism. . . The labor force is largely black and unskilled, so we are not attracting industry."

Instead of high-wage, manufacturing, such as the automobile industry, the city attracts distributors, agrusiness, service and tourism-oriented industry, Flexner says.

But the city is not ignoring the potential of highly paid manufacturing jobs. When the Memphis Area Chamber of Commerce reorganized last year, one of its major goals was to create 25,000 new manufacturing jobs in Memphis within the next five years.

Sam Hollis, past chamber president and now its chairman, says, "The overwhelming thrust of everybody I talk to is to encourage manufacturing jobs. But it's a chicken and egg situation as I see it. With our large unskilled labor pool, it's better to get them into the work force, even if not at the top wage scales, just get them on the job and earning a decent wage. The key then would be to bring in industry and, in the process, to create upward mobility." At the same time, Hollis, president of Federal Compress & Warehouse Co. (a service industry), disagrees with Flexner about the significance of a major distribution-service center. "It's a tremendous asset to have those jobs available. Jobs like the new Caterpillar Tractor Co. and Datsun Forklifts. Service industries are pretty stable, while manufacturing can be seasonal or cyclical. It's not all gravy when you have manufacturing."

Both blacks and whites point to increased representation of blacks in management level positions across the city as a sign of economic progress. County Court Squire Jesse Turner, president of Tri-State Bank of Memphis, calls it a "token number," but nevertheless significant. "It has kept a number of educated blacks in this community who would normally have gone to other communities. It will make itself felt eventually, that human resource, even one here another there. In the long run, I think this is going to increase tremendously the caliber of people we have."

Turner is one of the elected blacks and whites who put politics first on their list of improvements for the black community. Harold Ford was elected a U.S. representative, increasing his white vote percentage in the Eighth Congressional District from 14 per cent in 1974 to 31 per cent in 1976.

From one black on the County Court in 1968, there are now four. The Shelby County legislative delegation has grown slightly from 4 blacks out of 10 in 1968 to 7 blacks out of 17 in 1978. A City Council with three black members who took office in 1968 has not changed numerically, though it has had a black chairman. City and county boards and commissions have increased black membership from a scarce few in 1968 to representation, however slight, in most government functions.

As a measure of improvement in racial themes, Ford says that his black constituents are increasingly having "the same problems as everybody else. My office is dealing with complaints and projects involving the Veterans Administration, Social Security, federal grants and disability claims. I think whites are more conscious of the real problems of the city now. They are aware to the extent that they don't mind working together with political leaders, city leaders and leaders in general, black and white, toward solving the problems of the city as a whole."

Black voter registration was classified as "colored" in 1968. In Memphis then there were 149,983 registered white voters and 78,163 registered blacks. Now there are 218,053 registered whites and 134,342 registered blacks.

The figures show that black voter registration is increasing at a faster rate than white registration, despite annexations. Over the 10 years, the rate of black registration increased 71.9 per cent while the white registration rate increased 45.4 per cent. The black percentage of total registration has increased from 34.3 per cent in 1968 to 38.1 per cent now.

Blacks have been registered and voted in blocs in Memphis since the early '50s. "It has been somewhat unique in Memphis because of the Crump machine," says Russell B. Sugarman, a black attorney and former state representative.

"When the civil rights movement of the late '50s and early '60s got rolling Memphis was ahead of most cities politically. All we had to do was sever the umbilical (from white politicians)."

However, Sugarman and black City Councilman Fred Davis say that blacks have not taken "full advantage" of their bloc voting potential. And while those efforts increase, there are increasing overtures from Republicans for black votes.

William Farris, chairman of the state Democratic Party, predicts that trend will continue here. "I think there will be, as we see now, all political forces attempting to appeal to all voters."

Farris alludes to the priority problems in Memphis when he chides white leadership for its failure to take blacks into account. "There hasn't been an overall community awareness of the need for partnership between business and government leaders in this area. Now, there's a realization that in order for the city to prosper it's citizens must be productive and able to share the cost of government. It's just plain good business."

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