

INTER RACIAL RELATIONS

It was on January 13, 1946, that St. Peters church first officially confronted what might be called the racial issue. It had been reported that some land next to St. Peters cemetery might be sold to Negroes for the purpose of a burial ground. When that prospect was brought up at the congregational meeting the sixteen members present went on record "protesting the sale of land adjoining our cemetery for such purposes."

Up until then the moral implications relating to the racial issue were not discussed much in official public circles. In the early years Negro families lived on farms as tenants, and they worked in the fields with the white land owners. Relations between them were guided by unspoken social custom which permitted certain associations between the races and forbade others. For example, white children were taught by custom that it was all right to work in the fields alongside Negro children, but it was not all right to play together at other times. These lessons of custom were sometimes confusing and not always well learned by the children who in every generation tended to be more open and broad minded than the older folks.

An illustration from the Kaase family presents a case in point. On Saturday all the grown-ups of both white and Negro families on the farm went off to town to do the weekly trading. When the wagons were safely out of sight all the children on the place, white and black, got together to play. They made a sliding board on the tin roof of a farm building, one by one zipping down the roof into the loose hay below. One of their number, chosen to be the look-out, perched on top of another out-building near the road. At the first sight of the approaching wagons, the look-out whistled a signal, and all the children scurried to their respective houses. When the grown-ups pulled up in their yards, both sets of parents, white and Negro, were greeted by docile and obedient children on the front porch.

Until very recent years the races have been separated in religion as well as in education. The Negroes of Coupland worshipped in the Pear Valley Baptist Church. It dates back to the 1890s when Rev. Williams came from Houston to hold revival services in the wagon lot south of the cotton gin, resulting in the organizing of a small congregation which held services in a brush arbor structure. Then the group moved to the home of Rody Jones on the corner of Walker and Commerce Streets. Sometime later C. W. Pfluger

leased the congregation some land east of the railroad track. Gus Kneip helped to draw up the plans and contractor Kreuger built a sanctuary in 1912. Years later in 1932 the congregation bought a half acre of land from Pfluger and moved the church to that property where it stands today.

As the Negro population of Coupland has declined the membership in Pear Valley Church has dwindled until only 25 or 30 persons remain. Rev. L. D. Piper comes from Elgin to hold services on two Sundays a month. John Brockington is the chairman of the board of deacons.

Through the years a gradual change in attitude and relationships between the races has evolved. Many years ago, on its own initiative, the community integrated the busing of students to school. Later as a result of change in laws, the public school was integrated without incident. Today in 1974, 56% of the students are white, 33% Mexican American and 11% Negro in the eight grades of the Coupland Elementary School.

The change in attitude at St. Peters church was dramatically highlighted during the Lenten season of 1969. Pastor Johnson and the church council worked out a program of mid-week services featuring guest preachers from nearby communions which were involved in the ecumenical Council on Christian Union. The pastor called the members of the council together on Sunday and recommended that the guests in St. Peters pulpit include a minister from the African Methodist Episcopal Church. He suggested that the members of the council take the matter under advisement and be ready to act at the regular council meeting on the following Thursday.

Tension was somewhat high when at the meeting president Alfred Steit in a calm and collected manner encouraged each member to express his feelings fully and voice his opinions freely. Finally, when the vote was taken it was five to four in favor of extending the invitation. The minister, Rev. Johns, and his wife of Taylor graciously accepted the invitation, and they were graciously received at the service by the members of the congregation. Later in 1973 when some black children attended Sunday school, morning worship and Bible school the matter was raised for discussion again and no objection was registered.