

diversions

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Varsity

EQUAL ENTERTAINMENT

Chapel Hill's movement to integrate spurred by active protests

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DIVERSIONS EDITOR

It seems strange in hindsight. Just like so many of the now antiquated notions of segregation, the fact that anyone could be barred from seeing a film, or enjoying a restaurant, two of the most basic modes of modern entertainment, borders on the inconceivable.

But, it wasn't long ago that this reality was commonplace. Here in our town on top of the Hill, black students were not allowed admittance to the Varsity and Carolina Theaters, the prominent movie theaters in town located almost directly across the street from each other.

These were only two of the examples of the town's public accommodations that were segregated, even after the University admitted its first black students in 1951.

Even looking at the pictures, grasping the reality of it takes a second.

But there they are, black students marching in front of the former Carolina Theater, hoisting signs reading "We enjoy movies too."

And just across the way, white townspeople taking the opposite approach, marching in support of segregation.

In many ways, this divide represents the polarizing nature of the issue. For, even in a town that was known as one of the South's most liberal, the roots of segregation were deep.

John Ehle was a professor at UNC during the unrest, and wrote about his experiences in his book, "The Free Men."

"The students, too, were not, of course, liberally inclined as a group," he wrote.

"About 90 percent of them come from the South, most of them from North Carolina, and they represented the attitudes of thousands of Southern fami-

lies. I polled a class of about 50 students and asked them if they felt segregation should be permitted in schools, churches, movie theaters, restaurants and housing. The response was about fifty-fifty on all questions."

For those in the 50 percent opposing segregation, though — mainly the University's small population of black students, along with fellow black residents and a large contingent of black high school students — their response was swift and well-organized.

The response included sit-ins and protests throughout town, which began in February 1960 with the picketing of the Colonial Drug Store.

This effort was a direct response to the sit-ins which began in Greensboro only weeks previous.

"The big push started at about the same time as the Greensboro sit-ins," said John Chapman, who focuses his research on the history of the fight for civil rights in Chapel Hill.

"Mainly high school students were the ones protesting. We're talking 15 to 18 year olds."

Chapman said that although the University began admitting black undergraduates in 1955, only a "couple dozen" had enrolled between then and 1960.

But, these few students, when mixed with the town's black residents formed a coalition to oppose the segregation of the town's theater's and restaurants.

Chapel Hill was thought of as a model town for the state and region. Organizers believed that if they were able to affect change in Chapel Hill, other towns would follow.

The national civil rights organization, the Congress of Racial Equality established a chapter in town, and the protests and demonstrations continued.

Chapman said regular — and integrated — marches were held, and up to 500 people marched from the black churches on West Franklin Street to the current

site of the post office.

The movement for integration of the Varsity and Carolina Theaters saw its jumping-off point, when the Varsity's then-owner E. Carrington Smith refused an integrated showing of the film, "Porgie and Bess," which featured a predominantly black cast.

At this point, the Coalition for Open Movies was born, an organization advocating for the integration of theaters. The group even offered to send speakers to town civic groups. Eventually, the message was heard and in the fall of 1961, blacks enrolled in the University were allowed admittance, with the promise that if this policy was deemed a success a more liberal policy would follow.

Although success was achieved in integrating the theaters by 1962, other shops and restaurants lagged behind until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 mandated integration.

But before this victory was achieved, more than 1,000 demonstrators were arrested, in what Chapman called one of the biggest movements that took place in the state.

Chapman said that although, the general efforts fell short, great victories were achieved.

"They fell just short of the goal to make Chapel Hill a model for the entire South, but contributed so much to state and national movements," he said.

Black Student Movement President, Shaniqua McClendon, said those who worked for integration do serve as a model for current black students, though.

"Our current members need to appreciate the challenges black students had to go through," she said.

"We all need to know that history, and know the real reason that BSM is able to exist in the first place."

Contact the Dive Editor at dive@unc.edu.

TIMELINE: The movement to integrate public accommodations in Chapel Hill



1938 Pauli Murray, a young Black woman attempts to enroll in Howard Odum's sociology program. This was the first attempt to integrate UNC.

1951 First Black student enrolls in UNC Medical School

1952 UNC began admitting Black male undergraduates.

1960 February 1: First sit-ins occur in Greensboro

1961 Civil Rights Act passed by Congress, integrating all public accommodations

1963 Coalition formed between Black high schoolers, UNC students and you Black adults for a more concerted picketing movement

1938 Four black law students sue the University to gain enrollment to UNC's School of Law. The University claimed that the students should enroll at NCCU's law school because it was deemed to be equal.

DTH SARAH NEAL SIMPSON

1954 Brown v. Board of Education strikes down segregation in public schools.

1955 UNC facilities were desegregated by Chancellor Bill Friday

1960 Efforts begin to integrate the Varsity and Carolina Theaters

1960 February-May: Black high school students in Chapel Hill begin picketing Colonial Drug Store



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DIVEBLOG Stay tuned to the blog for updates (almost) every day.



briefly

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The self-proclaimed "King of Atlanta," T.I. returns with a regal album, full of guest appearances by the game's best.

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SCANNING THE DIAL

Chapel Hill's best classic rock revivalists, Transportation chat with Dive about the process of making their debut full-length.

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