

Daily Ledger  
Canton, IL 10/11/89

Ross Gardiner:

# Unity is essential to combat racism

By ROSS GARDINER  
Managing Editor

It is undeniable that racism exists within the community of Canton. The recent incident at the high school is only a manifestation of a deeper problem, a symptom of a lingering illness.

Racial prejudice is most obvious to those who experience it directly. In a virtually all-white community with few minority families, it is easier for the majority to assume racial prejudice does not exist or to even ignore the possibility that it may be a problem.

Canton is certainly no exception to the American experience. Racial prejudice and discrimination is a national problem, one which men and women of goodwill must battle in every corner of the country.

Just as in many other communities, it has been easier — let's say more practical — for minority families to attempt to ignore its existence. There are black families who have lived in the community for generations, attempting all along to cope with racial prejudice. The problem has not been discussed openly because neither the minority families nor the rest of the community has been prepared to recognize its existence.

That was the way it was throughout the country 25 years ago. It took freedom marches in Mississippi and the brutal deaths of student civil rights workers to alarm the rest of the country to the harsh reality. Minorities then began to realize they could muster the power of the ballot box and economic boycotts to influence change.

But in communities where there are few minority families, the odds have been perceived as too great to combat racism.

There have certainly been harsh

cases of racial discrimination but there has also existed, right here in our own community, an inability to recognize or discuss the issue. The incident at the high school, and the decision by one black mother — Mrs. Herscile Mackey — to speak out has resulted in the problem being discussed at a public forum. That development, in itself, may be an historic first for the community.

Realistically, minority families in Canton do not feel they can participate as part of the establishment or power structure. They have learned to avoid confrontation and have by and large given up any hope of being able to influence the system.

The existing power structure, a white establishment, has virtually no experience in dealing with racial disputes. A white official cannot completely comprehend the feeling a black person has when he or she experiences racist threats or taunts or a denial of opportunity solely on the basis of skin color.

Minority individuals are not part of the system and many whites are not conscious of the possibility of prejudice in the community. The time has come to initiate honest and frank communication to improve the community and its quality of life for all citizens.

The size of the minority community in Canton is small, but racism is a scourge which must be fought in every community in America. No community is so isolated that its children do not have to learn how to live peacefully with other races. The leadership in every community must develop a sensitivity to the problem and a willingness to confront it.

The suggestion that a committee be organized in the community to discuss the problem is a sound



Ross Gardiner

one. The dialogue which has finally come to the fore must be continued and must be directed toward effecting positive change. Community leaders as well as average citizens should be included in the effort. The talents of all men and women of goodwill must be utilized to improve the community with both suggestions and actions.

Canton can do it. The recent attention directed to the community has certainly alerted many to the problem they felt did not exist while also alerting the minority community to the fact that they can and should speak out.

I have no doubt that Canton can succeed in building on its experience — from the churches to the schools, the shops to the community organizations. After all, we have seen the community muster its resources to rebuild from economic

disaster when others would give up.

But we have to do it ourselves. We must be committed to ideals of an open society and means to make it open. Institutions such as the schools should encourage awareness of mind, history and culture. Political parties should seek the participation of minority voters. Employers should encourage opportunities for minority employees. Churches should unite to support such efforts and to speak out against racism.

This can be done because there are people in Canton who truly care about each other and the community. There are people who understand the example must be set by community leaders so that young people can learn that an open society is not only achievable, but is the preferred way of life.

Racial prejudice is not a unique problem. A bigot who discriminates against people because of the color of their skin will also discriminate on the basis of religion, income and other factors. The failure by any society or community to confront racism simply encourages the existence of other ills.

We should all join this battle together, regardless of race, religion, politics or ethnic heritage. It is up to us to determine what kind of a community we want.

Contact Canton School Superintendent Paul Vonderhaar or Mayor Don Edwards and let them know you agree and are willing to help. Talk about the issue and possible solutions at home, in church and wherever there are others who are willing to see change.

Let's provide an example for other communities.