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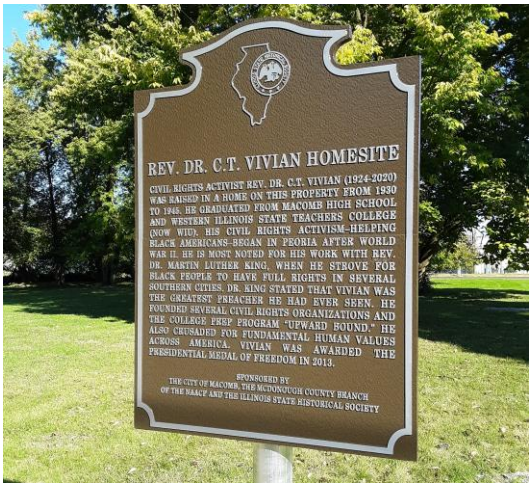
**Reflections on Racial Disharmony**

By Thomas V. Lerczak

"*It'd be a beautiful scene if all human beings could live in harmony*" - Edward David Anderson, from the song *Harmony*

During recent years, with daily news of civil strife, wars, election fatigue, and lockdowns from the COVID pandemic, I've frequently needed the escape of a bicycle ride through my town, Macomb, Illinois. I felt relief during those short trips around the city parks, becoming lost in the motion and focusing on the simple aspects of changing light patterns from shade trees, cloud formations, the wind and weather passing over the town, and whatever birds and wildlife I might see.

On one of those rides, to purchase a daily newspaper, I meandered over to the northeast side of town. I specifically went down East Adams Street, searching for a vacant lot with an Illinois State Historical Society marker, indicating the location of C.T. (Cordy Tindell) Vivian's childhood home.




Reverend C.T. Vivian was a Baptist minister and a civil rights activist who was a colleague of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He was born in Missouri in 1924, but was raised and educated in Macomb; he died on July 17, 2020 at age 95. C.T. Vivian was on the front lines fighting for equal rights, especially the right to vote. He was a Freedom Rider (these were individuals who in 1961 protested segregated bus terminals, restrooms, and lunch counters in the South) who was beaten and jailed more than once. In an article originally published in ***New South***, July-August 1961, Frank Holloway describes one such encounter: "*Rev. C.T. Vivian of Chattanooga was beaten pretty bad. When he came out he had blood streaming from his head. They took him to the penal farm doctor, who apparently patched him up so he looked like he had not been beaten when we saw him again…So, after being guarded by men with guns big enough to kill an elephant, called nasty and unbelievable names, beaten until blood ran down some of our faces, we were ordered to work in the fields in 100-degree weather from sunup until sundown."* I knew about this, and after reading the memorial marker, I looked around at the neighborhood, realizing that from where I stood, C.T. Vivian's life had been centered for a time, and that that life had matured and been influenced in a unique way, one that would result in significant, positive change in the world; I could almost feel the energy in the air. Born in 1957, I was too young during most of the 1960s to really understand the meaning of what was happening all around me (in terms of civil rights issues). By virtue of the historical marker and its surroundings, I felt a connection to C.T. Vivian, and that caused me to think about what I myself had experienced in Chicago and later in Cicero.

When I lived in Chicago during the 1960s, it was a highly racially segregated city. There were Black neighborhoods and white neighborhoods, with distinct

boundaries, typically a railroad yard, a single rail line, an expressway, or waterway (for years, racial restrictive covenants and deed restrictions legally prevented Blacks from moving into white areas). This was the world I grew up in; at the time, I didn't question it or wonder how it came to be that way. But it became scary on April 4, 1968, when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. Looting and riots ensued. Schools were dismissed early, and thick smoke from burning buildings filled the skies in the direction of the inner city neighborhoods. The authorities instituted a nighttime curfew and, as I recall, used the National Guard to restore order. We fully expected our quiet neighborhood, in the Little Village section of Chicago, to be invaded by mobs with torches. Well before these events, our family had been searching for a larger home. And as chance would have it, by year's end, we had moved a few miles west to Cicero, one of Chicago's older suburbs.

Cicero was well known for gangster activity during prohibition times and for its concentration of Czech culture (clubs, restaurants, and bakeries), which would have been a great appeal to my Czech-immigrant grandparents, with whom my mother, brother, and I lived. And Cicero was a convenient location, being at the terminus of a main public transportation artery, which provided a direct connection to downtown, where my mother worked. But Cicero was also infamous as a place where African-Americans were decidedly unwelcome; for example, in 1951, a riot of 4,000 individuals erupted, making the national news, as a reaction to a single Black man renting a Cicero apartment. In 1966, Cicero again made the national news when activists staged a march right through the heart of town to protest its discriminatory housing practices. Although I was only eight years old at the time, I vaguely remember hearing about that march.

At any rate, we gradually settled into new, unfamiliar surroundings in Cicero, including a new school (where I had my own challenges fitting in), and thought little about racial issues, at least for a while. One afternoon in 1969 or 1970 I was at home watching television, probably a rerun of the sitcom *Gilligan's Island* or something similar, when I began to notice quite a few people quickly walking in one direction past my house. I thought that something must be happening, like a fire. In the next minute, the phone rang; it was a friend, who lived close by, frantic that a family of Black people had moved into an apartment on my street, about a block away. And a crowd was gathering! I wasted no time, and went to find out for myself what was happening. And sure enough, a large crowd of maybe several hundred people had gathered. But the situation was strangely calm, with everyone simply standing around looking confused. The police had already escorted the family—who turned out to be Filipino—away for their own safety. Nothing to see here; I went home, and, eventually, so did everyone else. Calm soon returned to our new neighborhood, but I was learning that bitter, deep-seated racial issues were never far away.

As I entered my teen years and became more adventurous, I, with a friend or alone, frequently rode the "L" train (an elevated electrical commuter line) from Cicero to downtown Chicago to spend the day walking around or visiting museums and parks along Lake Michigan. When the train passed from Cicero to Chicago, not only did it cross a municipal boundary, but it crossed one of those invisible dividing lines. From then on, all the way to downtown, quite a few of the people boarding the train were Black, very unlike Cicero. Superficially, the

houses, yards, trees, and streets resembled Cicero, but the general feel was different: more disrepair and a palpable lack of prosperity. I didn't understand why it was that way and could not blame any of the residents of those neighborhoods for wanting to move to better areas, even to Cicero. It was like watching a movie documentary of a foreign land as the train traveled along.

Other experiences bridging the racial divides were not so benign. In high school, I obtained my first motorcycle. It had a small, worn-out 125 cc engine that in terms of acceleration was slothful at best, the gaskets leaked about a quart of oil every thirty miles or so, and it was prone to dying out at stop lights. Late one summer evening, though, I was the big man on the block when a friend's teenage sister, Christine, asked me for a ride. Most of the streets in Cicero were boring, straight, and strictly oriented on the four cardinal directions. But I knew exactly where to take her for a more interesting ride: Columbus Park, which had twisting roads; and the park was not far away, being just on the north side of the Eisenhower Expressway. I knew that beyond the expressway it was a Black neighborhood, but I never gave that a second thought.

Soon after turning down the main park road, we both saw a very large group of young men standing around about a quarter of a mile ahead. Christine said we should probably turn around, but I kept going. Then as the cycle's accelerating motor commanded their attention, they formed into an unruly mob and began to yell and run in our direction. So I hit the brakes hard and quickly made a U-turn, hoping upon hope that the engine would not die. As the distance between us and the gang shrank, they started throwing rocks and bottles. One of them threw a baseball bat, which Christine miraculously caught in mid-air. Yet we continued to speed away, faster and faster, until we were back on our side of the expressway. I never went back to Columbus Park.

A few years later some friends and I were aimlessly driving around Chicago's Near North neighborhoods after dark, probably looking for a pizza restaurant, when we noticed the gas gage was well beyond empty. All of us were usually short on cash, and typically put only as much gas in a vehicle as was absolutely necessary. We were used to running the car's engine on "fumes" and imagining there was always more fuel in the tank than the gage indicated. But this time, the gas gage indicator was farther beyond the red "E" mark than we had ever seen. So we picked a street at random and frantically searched for a gas station. Soon a brightly lit gas station came into view just ahead at an intersection; it was across from the Cabrini-Green public housing project, notorious for its gang activity, crime, drug dealing, and hopelessness. In the middle of the street intersection was the hulk of a burned out automobile that was still smoking. We pulled into the station, as the attendant, an old Black man, nervously walked over to our car; he took one look at us, and said, "You boys need to get out of this neighborhood NOW*!*" "Okay," we replied, "but we really need gas!" I think we purchased at most two dollars of regular, and then probably used most of it speeding away from the pumps and back across the invisible neighborhood boundary.

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During the 1980s, I moved away from the Chicago area to small towns in southern Illinois and finally central Illinois, leaving the big city and its problems behind to focus mostly on birds and learning how

nature works. Since those long ago times, I'm still trying to understand how the Chicago social landscape that I experienced fits into history and what it all might mean as times change and hopefully improve as prejudices continue to be confronted. And I'm grateful for memorials and historical markers that help combine physical reality, context, and ideas into a more complete picture, reminding me not to forget the past as well as to learn from it.

*C.T. Vivian Mural on East Carrol Street, Macomb, Illinois.*

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*Civil War Monument, Chandler Park, Macomb, Illinois.*