

PERSPECTIVE

The New Tri-State Defender, February 9 - 15, 2017, Page 4

OUR STORY, PART II

The New Tri-State Defender began telling "Our" story on Nov. 1, 1951 as the Tri-State Defender. With a February 2017 "Legends and Leaders" salute, the TSD will note its evolution. In conjunction with the celebration, we are looking back on our history, drawing in part on research Rhodes College professor and administrator Russell Wigginton conducted on the newspaper's first 50 years.

This is Dr. Wigginton's second segment (with a few modifications) of the newspaper's first 50 years.

When the words of this headline were quoted by A. Maceo Walker, president of Tri-State Bank and Universal Life Insurance Company in the *Tri-State Defender* in early 1960, he could not have known how profound they would become for black Memphians.

Walker was responding to the banning of African Americans from the Auto Show at Ellis auditorium, but his sentiments captured black frustration due to the continuous broken promises since legal segregation was overturned with the *Brown v. Board of Education* victory in 1954.

African Americans in Memphis and throughout the country were hopeful that comprehensive racial discrimination was a practice of the past, yet as they soon found out, many more battles would have to be fought nationally and locally before blacks could rest.

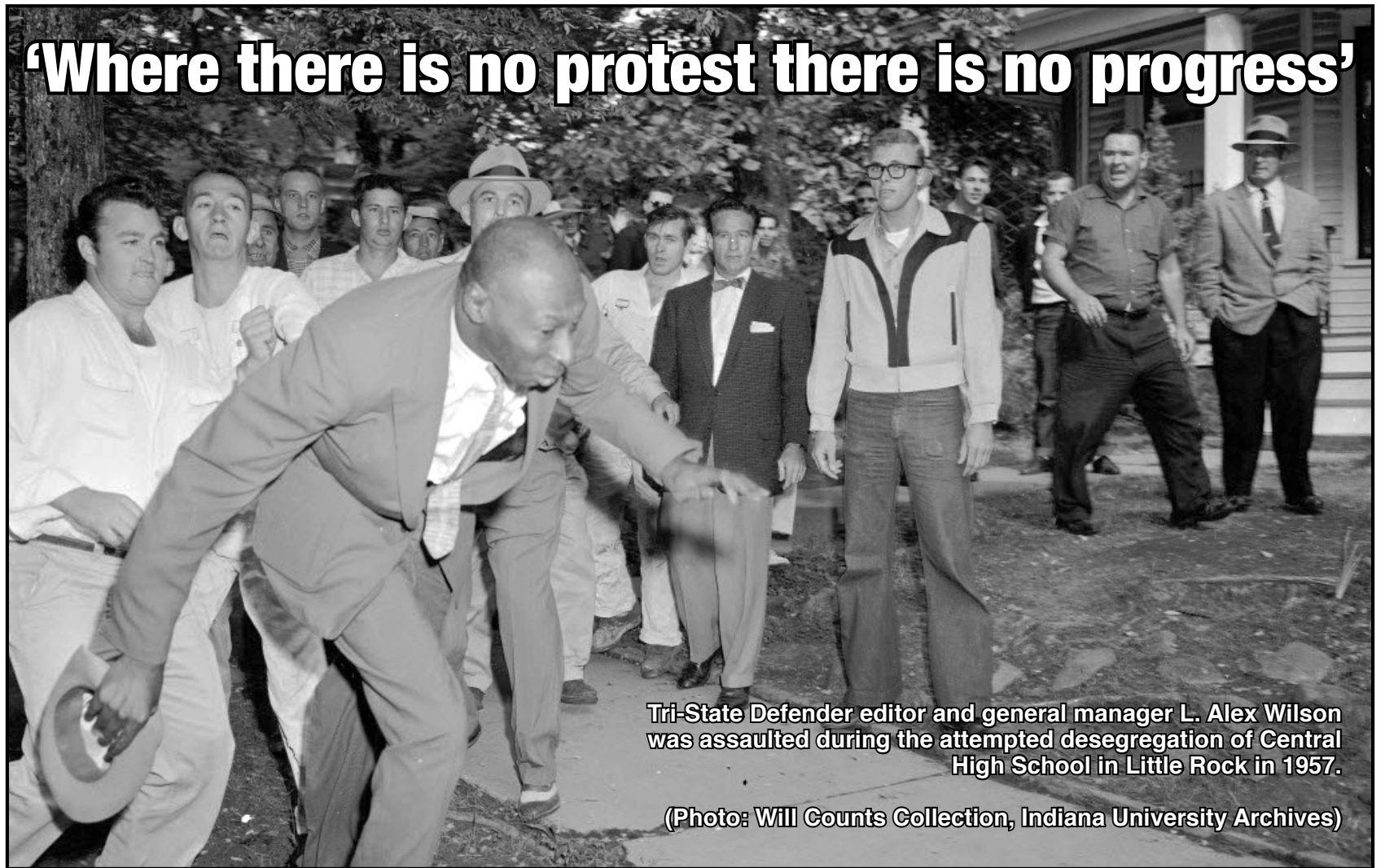
The most memorable incident to remind blacks that their status had changed little by the mid-1950s was the gruesome death of Emmett Till in Money, Miss. Often described as "one of those events that will never leave you," Till's death provoked anger, sadness, and fear for blacks everywhere. For Memphians, the proximity of Till's "lynching" and the *Tri-State Defender's* vivid portrayal of his open casket reminded them that they too were subject to the region's racial violence.

Despite these troubled times, black Memphians persevered with a renewed vigor and relentless spirit that would fuel their fight for better conditions in the city. Over the next few years the *Defender* highlighted the arrival of several "freedom fighters" in Memphis.

In November 1955, the *Defender* recognized a gala banquet held by the local branch of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in honor of their president, A. Philip Randolph. The paper published a picture of Randolph speaking before a capacity crowd at Martin Temple CME church with local BSCP president H.F. Patton and treasurer F.S. Newman.

Also featured with Randolph were H.T. Lockard (president of the Memphis NAACP) and *Tri-State Defender* editor L.O. Swingler having dinner at Currie's Supper Club. The following year Mrs. Rosa Parks, the heroine from Montgomery, spoke at Mt. Olive CME Cathedral for their women's day celebration. Also, Memphis named a U.S. Post Office (located at 828 Mississippi Blvd.) for its own Lt. George W. Lee, the political leader and champion for race causes.

By the end of the 1950s the atmosphere necessary for confrontation was evident among Memphis African-Americans and in the pages of the *Tri-State Defender*. With the guidance of Memphis NAACP education chairman, Dr. Vasco Smith, approximately 100 black parents petitioned the school



board to end segregation in local schools. Smith argued "our school board has not made any tangible effort to operate our school system within the framework of the Constitution but has stubbornly defied the highest law of the land."

In support of Smith, the *Defender* boldly urged the Memphis Board of Education to act immediately to desegregate Memphis schools.

The demands of Memphis' black community chronicled in the *Tri-State Defender* foreshadowed the events of 1960, arguably the most

particular cars, their refused entry to the Auto Show sparked them to attack segregationist practices in bus seating, the library, eating facilities at most public places, and schools.

While there were countless efforts to overturn segregation, the *Tri-State Defender* staff was involved in one particularly impressive example. Alongside approximately 60 students from LeMoyne and Owen colleges, the entire *Tri-State Defender* editorial staff was arrested for attempts to desegregate the libraries at Cossitt and Peabody and the Brooks Art

the protest foolish, the students responded, "We feel that cotton does nothing for Negroes to cause them to celebrate."

As students and other black citizens continued to stage disruptions to the segregation norms of the city, measurable changes occurred. One event captured by the *Tri-State Defender* was a front-page picture of an integrated bus with African Americans sitting wherever they desired.

This small but significant victory for integration was tempered by the death

throughout the city, and only time would tell if these claims were true. In an effort to test desegregation in restaurants, *Tri-State Defender* reporters M.L. Reid and William Little visited several places to see if they would be served. As expected, they received mixed reactions, but their presence made a statement that African Americans in Memphis and the *Tri-State Defender* were watching closely.

Not everyone welcomed the presence of the *Defender*. However, while photographing a demonstration after the assassination of Mississippi civil rights leader Medgar Evers in mid-1963, Ernest Withers had his coat ripped off, was beaten with a nightstick and had the film in his camera deliberately exposed by policemen. Nonetheless, like his colleagues at the newspaper, Withers never backed down from his responsibilities as a newspaper photographer.

Similar intimidation tactics against African Americans continued throughout the summer. One month after the Withers attack, someone fired shots in the car carrying attorneys B.L. Hooks, R. Sugarmon, and A. Willis along with the Rev. James Lawson. The community leaders were returning from a trip to Somerville to assist 30 black citizens who were arrested after staging sit-ins in Fayette County. Fortunately, none of the men were seriously injured in the shooting incident. And, Hooks, Sugarmon and Willis refused to succumb to the threats of violence and returned to Somerville for the hearing scheduled for those arrested.

Overall, African-Americans in Memphis in the early 1960s followed A. Maceo Walker's suggestion to protest for racial progress. As the efforts of the many protestors indicate (and the many people who worked behind the scenes), black Memphians demanded comprehensive change in the Mid-South's racial culture; and there to insure that they got a fair shake was Memphis' own, the *Tri-State Defender*.

The people's perseverance combined with the support of the *Defender* would remain critical in the tumultuous times during the mid-1960s forward.

'I decided not to run.

If I were beaten, I'd take it walking if I could – not running...

Any newsman worth his salt is dedicated to the proposition that it is his responsibility to report the news factually under favorable and unfavorable conditions.'

– L. Alex Wilson, Tri-State Defender Editor, one day after escaping assault in Little Rock

turbulent year in race relations that the city and paper had experienced. Beginning with the Emancipation Proclamation anniversary, Memphis African Americans pushed for what they described as "real emancipation to Negroes."

Sponsored by the Emancipation Association of Shelby County (chaired by Dr. W. Herbert Brewster, pastor of East Trigg Baptist Church), the event at Ellis auditorium was highlighted by Lt. Lee's words, "We are waiting to see if the City Commission sworn in today will meet the challenge to bringing freedom to Negroes in Memphis."

Black Memphians and the *Tri-State Defender* were definitely ready. One week after Lee's statement, *Tri-State Defender* writer Burleigh Hines, chief photographer George Hardin and others reported that they were denied admittance to the Auto Show at Ellis auditorium, having been told by policemen that "Colored can't come in here today."

The incident sparked a flood of letters to the *Defender* and widespread outcry by black citizens. Although many blacks were initially frustrated because they owned automobiles valued at an estimated \$50 million but could not view these

Gallery.

The students, who appeared in their "Sunday Best" on the front page of the *Defender*, were charged with disorderly conduct and fined for their actions. The *Defender* staff was charged with the same misdemeanor, but editor and general manager L.F. Palmer had to pay a higher fine for his alleged leadership in the demonstrations.

Palmer and the entire *Tri-State Defender* organization received more intense repercussions shortly afterwards when a cross was burned on the front lawn of their office building. Although three white youths were arrested for performing what they called "a prank," the message was clear: the *Defender* was an influential piece of Black Memphis' protest plan.

Coincidentally, only a few weeks after his arrest, Palmer received a citation from Capital Press Club of Washington, D.C. for his distinguished service in mass communication.

Additionally, Memphis black college students continued their "troublemaking." The students decided to picket at the annual Cotton Jubilee activities. Despite Jubilee founder Dr. R.O. Venson calling

of award-winning journalist L. Alex Wilson. He was most recognized as the man who was physically assaulted outside of Central High School during Little Rock's desegregation attempt in 1957. Wilson's presence at Central High School epitomized the courage and passion that he consistently demonstrated as the *Tri-State Defender's* editor and general manager and later editor-in-chief for the *Chicago Daily Defender*.

Progress in the struggle for racial equity did not come any easier after 1960, but many black Memphians and the *Tri-State Defender* remained on the front lines. For example, in early 1963 blacks began to play golf at places like Audubon Park for the first time. Although this was a public course, blacks were restricted to only a few courses in the city.

Also, through the hard work of the local NAACP and its executive secretary, Maxine Smith, more than 100 local firms announced changes in their hiring policies and practices. Once she was told the news, Smith replied, "the NAACP is proud to have played a prominent role in initiating and helping to carry out this program."

Similar claims of desegregation were made by other businesses

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