

St. Augustine's Swimming Pool Incident and the Civil Rights Act

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INTRODUCTION

St. Augustine was Florida's most popular tourist attraction in 1964. Like many Southern cities at that time, St. Augustine's beaches and pools were segregated. In the summer of 1964, St. Augustine became the target for a massive nonviolent civil rights demonstration. When attempts were made to integrate the beaches of Anastasia Island, demonstrators endured abuse, beatings, and verbal assaults by White segregationists without any retaliation.



Virgil Stuart, St. Augustine Chief of Police around demonstrators

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to develop a narrative of the historical events preceding and following the 1964 Monson Motel pool incident, in St. Augustine, Florida.

METHODS

A literature review included historical documentation from the International Swimming Hall of Fame (ISHOF), publications and related Web sites. Primary and secondary sources of data were analyzed by historiography.

ANALYSIS

In 1964, racial reform and racial extremism clashed in St. Augustine, Florida, the city the Southern Christian Leadership Conference targeted for the activities of its nonviolent army. Under the leadership of Dr. King, Jr., demonstrations were staged in St. Augustine with the hope of provoking the U.S. Congress into passing civil rights legislation. Extremists, led by Ku Klux Klan and John Birch Society members, saw in St. Augustine a last opportunity to halt the forces of racial change (Colburn, 1991). The demonstrations escalated on June 11, 1964 when Martin Luther King, Jr. was arrested after being denied entry to the Monson Motor Lodge restaurant.



A few days later, on June 18, 1964, a group of white and black protesters jumped into the pool at the Monson Motel. Two white northern integrationists, who had secured accommodations at the motor lodge, jumped into the swimming pool. Several black men and women immediately followed them. The whole group congregated in the middle of the pool where police officers could not reach them. The white integrationists insisted that the blacks were their guests and hence not guilty of trespassing. The manager of the motel, apparently under great stress and excitement, poured a bottle of muriatic acid into the pool hoping to scare the demonstrators into leaving. This substance is commonly added to swimming pools as a disinfectant, a fact well known to one of the white demonstrators. He calmed the apprehension of the blacks by offering to drink some of the water to prove it was harmless. An off-duty patrolman finally jumped into the pool and the whole group was dragged out and arrested. The TV and news cameras picked up the whole bizarre scene for millions of viewers all over the United States, Europe and the rest of the world.



CONCLUSIONS

Photographs of the swimming pool incident in St. Augustine have been credited with helping persuade undecided legislators to vote in favor of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawing segregation in all public places and facilities. The U.S. Senate passed the act on June 19, 1964, and President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the bill into law on July 2, 1964.



Some of his friends said James Brock (the owner of the Monson) was a good man who was caught between the segregationists and the integrationists, trying to make a living in a segregated town. The muriatic acid incident is famous, but what is less known is that as soon as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed he announced that he would abide by the law. He served blacks a few days after the new law passed and he was punished for this by having his motel firebombed, presumably by the Klan.

Photographs of Monson Motel pool incident were broadcasted around the world and became some of the most famous images of the entire civil rights movement.

SELECTED REFERENCES

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2. Sitkoff, H. (1981). *The struggle for black equality*. New York, Hill and Wang.
3. ISHOF publications
4. Dare Not Walk Alone, Documentary by Jeremy Dean (2006)