

Some Conditions in Milwaukee at the Time of Brown v. Board of Education

Frank Zeidler

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.law.marquette.edu/mulr>



Part of the [Law Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Frank Zeidler, *Some Conditions in Milwaukee at the Time of Brown v. Board of Education*, 89 Marq. L. Rev. 75 (2005).

Available at: <http://scholarship.law.marquette.edu/mulr/vol89/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Marquette Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Marquette Law Review by an authorized administrator of Marquette Law Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact megan.obrien@marquette.edu.

SOME CONDITIONS IN MILWAUKEE AT THE TIME OF *BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION*

FRANK ZEIDLER*

At the time of the decision of the United States Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education*,¹ there was much evidence of growing tension and problems in relations between African Americans and the white population of the City of Milwaukee, which was diverse with a certain ethnic competitiveness within itself. The cause of the tension was the increasing migration into the City of Milwaukee of persons of color, first from the northernmost Southern states and then from the Deep South. This migration had been accelerated in the 1940's by the Second World War and the demand for workers in the industrial plants of Milwaukee. Of special interest was the arrival of Jamaican workers into the then Sixth Ward of the City of Milwaukee.

In the latter part of the 1940's, Mayor John L. Bohn of Milwaukee formed a city committee to improve race relations, particularly after some severe racial events in Detroit. This type of committee existed in one form or another until abolished after 1960 by Mayor Henry W. Maier. In the late 1940's it was active in solving a race issue in a trailer camp in Greenfield Township. There was an underlying resistance in the Milwaukee area to African American people, the causes of which included cultural differences and physical fear on the part of whites who had encountered personal or property injuries. However, also among white cultural groups there were tensions and rivalries, especially political rivalries, from the founding of city.

In a discussion on the impact of *Brown*, it is necessary to note some

* Frank Zeidler was born in Milwaukee in 1912, and he received his education in the Milwaukee Public Schools ("MPS"). He was the Director of MPS in the 1940s and served as mayor of Milwaukee from 1948 to 1960, elected as a candidate of the Socialist Party, in which he remains active. With his wife Agnes, he continues to live in the heart of Milwaukee, and in 2004 he was President of the Central North Community Council. He delivered his reflections on the era at Marquette University Law School's conference, *Segregation and Resegregation: Wisconsin's Unfinished Experience, Brown's Legacy After 50 Years*, on April 8, 2004.

1. 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

conditions that existed in Milwaukee just prior to the 1954 decision, especially those conditions related to housing and the locations where people of color lived.

In the period from the Great Depression beginning in 1929 to 1946, there was a severe shortage of housing accommodations in the city. There was little building during the Depression period, which lasted until 1939, after which war orders revived business. Then there was even less building except for temporary shelter during the war. As a result, in the late 1940's an issue arose of providing necessary housing for returning war veterans for meeting the general housing shortage. One of the methods was to follow the pattern developed during the Franklin Roosevelt administration in the 1930's of constructing public housing by government assistance. Two major projects of this type had been built in the Milwaukee area—Parklawn in 1934 and Greendale in 1935. In the new case, housing was to be provided by the City of Milwaukee itself.

This type of proposal, chiefly advocated by a Joint Action Committee for Better Housing under the leadership of Genevieve Hambley, Nora Reith, and Frances Beverstock, was a controversial issue because the private builders, rooming house and apartment house owners felt threatened by this development. Still others felt that this was socialistic and therefore un-American. Nevertheless, the Joint Action Committee succeeded in getting a public housing project approved by the Mayor and Common Council in 1946 or 1947, with a location of the project in a blighted section of the Sixth Ward, in the vicinity of North Sixth and North Seventh Streets and West Vliet Street. This was an area originally built by German settlers in the 1840's and 1850's and was dilapidated by the 1940's. The area had become the residence chiefly of African American residents who had arrived in the city in the 1920's and 1930's.

The issue of providing housing for returning veterans was one of the major issues in the 1948 municipal elections in Milwaukee. Proposed city funding of public housing for veterans was on the ballot in the form of a referendum. I was one of fifteen candidates for mayor, and I was elected. I was a known Socialist backed by the Municipal Enterprise Committee, which supported public housing.

Shortly thereafter, among other actions taken in my administration was the construction of two major veterans' housing projects, Northlawn and Southlawn, and the expansion of a project begun by my predecessor, Mayor John L. Bohn, the Hillside project on West Vliet Street. The Hillside project was a partial answer to the Jamaican

immigrant situation, and also it was considered a move toward clearing a badly blighted area. Without it being spoken about, it was probably naturally considered by the voters of Milwaukee that the veterans' projects would be largely for white veterans.

The housing shortage being great, it was not quickly alleviated and other projects were commenced, including an addition to the Hillside project, the construction of the Berryland project, and the very large Westlawn project. Also there was a project for the elderly on the site of the School Sisters of Notre Dame Convent on North Jefferson Street near Ogden. In addition, the city engaged in a vigorous resumption of annexation of unincorporated lands to provide lands for private builders.

All this activity was highly disturbing to the real estate interests, to the rooming house owners, to some landlords, and to the private business leadership of the Milwaukee area. They saw this city activity as threatening their livelihood. The fear that these projects would be filled with African American residents did not immediately surface. The original main objection was that such activity was socialistic and the city should not be competing with private renters and owners of property. The forces in opposition to public housing and for private profit making in housing were politically powerful, and there was only a narrow space of time when it was possible to actively promote public housing in Milwaukee, and this time came nearly to a complete end by 1952.

A major factor in this development was the increasing migration of African Americans in Milwaukee and mostly into the Sixth Ward, the former location of German and Jewish immigrants. It became apparent to people that the building of housing for low income people might be a strong attraction for large numbers of people of color to move to Milwaukee to get the benefits of housing, social support, and possibly industrial jobs. In the 1950's the African American population of the city grew by about 4500 to 5000 per year, many of the people having first resided in Chicago, which also was seeing the influx of many African Americans.²

At some time in the early 1950's an African American clergyman announced that there would be a Sunday School conference in Milwaukee bringing in 10,000 visitors. This produced a state of panic among some people as to where such a number of African American

2. I note that in the 1950's African Americans were identified as "Colored" persons, or as Negroes. In the 1960's they became identified as "Blacks," from the use of the term "Black Power." In the 1990's the term African American came into use.

people would be housed and taken care of in a city where the total African American population was now about 30,000 to 35,000 people. In my opinion, it is possible that this event, which incidentally occurred without any problems of accommodation, may have been the source of an idea to attack the Socialist mayor through attributing to him the reason for what was then described as Negro immigration to Milwaukee. A rumor began to spread in the 1952 municipal election that the reason there was the arrival of African Americans in Milwaukee was that the mayor had posted billboards in the South inviting Negroes to come to Milwaukee. This was a formidable rumor with which to cope, especially because there were private real estate practices at work reinforcing it. At the opening of an addition to the Hillside housing project in 1952, I publicly challenged this issue as one of human rights. Thereafter for the next eight years this issue of African American immigration into Milwaukee became the major issue in Milwaukee city public policy.

The rumor gained strength from the fact that as a Socialist, I had publicly adopted the position that any person who came to Milwaukee of whatever color, race, religion or origin would have equal rights and equal responsibilities. I early recognized that there would be a major problem in Milwaukee if a very large number of new immigrants, including African Americans and Hispanics, came to the city, and the city attempted to accommodate them at a time of housing shortage and insufficient other accommodations. Nevertheless, the principle of treating all individuals equally and fairly seemed to be part of the Socialist tradition.

Also it must be said that the relatively humane relations of political and social conditions that existed in Wisconsin, perhaps chiefly through the joint efforts of LaFollette Progressives, the Victor Berger Socialists, and the labor unions, were certainly a source of attraction to people who were disenfranchised in southern states. Yet in Milwaukee the representatives of private business and real estate interest seemed to have convinced many of the citizens that the flow of African Americans to the city was the deliberate result of the work of the Socialist mayor. It was in this political atmosphere in Milwaukee that the decision of *Brown* occurred.

Brown also occurred at a time when a certain real estate practice in Milwaukee was affecting how white Americans viewed African Americans. Some real estate operators engaged in "block busting." The practice was that of advising white property owners on a street or on a block that African American owners would be purchasing or renting a house. This would tend to depress real estate prices and

values. Some people would immediately sell at a reduced price after which the property might have been sold to an African American owner for a much higher price. Block busting tended to introduce white flight from an area. The practice was prevalent in the area of the old West Side of Milwaukee and the German North Side. Naturally, this did not engender good feelings between races. Whites felt they had lost property value and were being forced out, and African Americans felt they were being charged excessively for property.

One resulting development of this practice was the higher density occupation of older houses by African American families with their continued concentration in the central North Side. The older German and Jewish populations, while not enthusiastically receptive of this development, nevertheless were not openly hostile and resistive but simply moved out.

A concentration of African Americans in a housing area had an effect on the policies of the Milwaukee Board of School Directors. It had been an historic policy for students living in an area to attend neighborhood schools. However, in the 1950's and even more so in the 1960's, with the African American population clustered in some North Side districts with even higher numbers of children for the schools, some existing elementary schools became over-crowded. This led to busing whole classes from one neighborhood school to another where there might be classroom space. In effect, some public neighborhood schools became schools with a large African American student body. This condition in turn led to some African American leaders and some whites proclaiming that this was a practice of "separate but equal" education with *Brown* being rejected and that the school board had to do more to integrate schools. It was considered by some people that in schools where most students were African American, this was on its face a sign of inferior public education. The result was two decades of street protest and legal action by whites and blacks to integrate schools by busing. In 1976, if my memory is correct, Federal Judge John Reynolds held that the past practice of the Milwaukee Board of School Directors on neighborhood schools was discriminatory and more effort was to be made to integrate the system.

I note some things in Milwaukee that occurred after *Brown*, things which have had a current bearing on the public schools condition. In 1956 the major issue in the mayoral election was that of racial matters. I won that bitter race, but the ferment over the subject did not subside and indeed increased. In 1960 the municipal election for mayor again included the element of race policy. The winner, State Senator Henry

W. Maier, fearful of the kinds of attacks I experienced, stopped housing, curbed some redevelopment, and tried to avoid addressing housing needs of African Americans and their demands. He got rid of a human rights city committee. The reaction included a public disturbance of major proportions in 1967, the result of which was to hasten white flight of people and businesses from the city.

Nevertheless, the policies of Mayor Maier did not stop the flow of people from the southern states and from Chicago. A resulting residential concentration of African Americans produced the result that they were able to elect a significant number of important and influential local and state officials and to exercise considerable influence over not only city but also state governmental policies.

There also arose in the African American community an opposition to having African American children taught by white American teachers. The idea that African American children had to go to white schools for a better quality of education was being sharply rejected, especially by one highly influential state representative. This view was a significant but unrecognized challenge to the central concept of *Brown*.

In the white community, a dissatisfaction of people sending their children to schools with African American students was manifest in many places and resulted in the growth of parochial education. This in turn fostered a demand for public money to support parochial and even private education. The concept of integration was not working well, and the Milwaukee Public Schools' student population was in greatest proportion African American. There were not enough white students left to provide universal integration.

In addition, a new factor entered in the problem of public education: the increase in the Hispanic population and the demand for what was called bilingual/bi-cultural teaching. Translated, this term meant the teaching of Hispanic students in Hispanic languages by persons of Hispanic descent. The Milwaukee School Board made some accommodations in this direction.

In the period after 1988, for several reasons the Milwaukee Public Schools came under the strongest attacks yet. One of these was the unfavorable view by an influential part of the voting public of the Milwaukee Teachers Education Association as a teachers' union. Another source was the feeling that the system, now the major teaching system for African Americans, was failing to uphold teaching standards. Another was the long held idea that private and parochial education should receive public subsidies. Still another may have been the perception on the part of white public office holders in the Milwaukee

City Hall that white people were moving from the city because they were not willing to send their children to public schools, which were thought to have students of color who also tended to be disruptive. Therefore, the state law was changed over time to support parochial and private education systems, somewhat at the expense of the Milwaukee Public Schools. The Milwaukee Public Schools became socially downgraded as a desirable educational system.

Looking back on Milwaukee history, it appears that *Brown* had a temporary effect of integrating Milwaukee Public Schools between white and African Americans, but it was not a lasting one, and the decline of the numbers of white people in the city of Milwaukee and the migration of students to schools outside of the Milwaukee system, whether public or private, have occurred. Over the period of five decades since *Brown*, the public schools in Milwaukee have been challenged as the only desirable educational system for any students, including students of color. Privatized education has been exalted by Wisconsin state government and local political leaders.

A major question then confronts the public policy maker: Are human cultures so different that they cannot be readily integrated despite the most carefully thought out public policy and law? This is the same type of question the Roman Catholic Church in America faced in the nineteenth century when the issue of whether congregations should be formed around ethnic populations was raised. The main theme was that they should not be so formed, but they were formed on ethnic and cultural basis probably more often than not.

Looking at the role law has played, it has been noted that, at least in Milwaukee, the fundamental claim was that separate education for people of color produces unequal educational opportunities. In modern Milwaukee, separate schools for persons of color are in ascendancy, but as private schools apart from the public system and not funded with public money. Also, the challenge has been made to *Brown* that people of a different cultural or racial origin are better off in their own schools with people of their own culture. Also, by national and local legislation, religious education, indirectly funded by the public, has come into existence in part because white parents do not want to send their children to integrated public schools.

Another aspect of *Brown* in Milwaukee is whether legally enforced student integration could force housing integration. This is in effect

what Judge Reynolds' decision³ of 1976 seemed to indicate. It apparently has not worked, perhaps primarily for the reason that when people of a common ethnic or cultural origin live in proximity to each other, this proximity is rewarded by them gaining political power.

In retrospect, the effect of *Brown* in Milwaukee was to integrate society through integration of the school system, but other factors such as community safety, job loss, and especially the political rewards from advocating ethnic separatism and privatization of education seem to have greatly diminished, though not extinguished, its value. The concept of universal public education funded by public funds has lost prestige and effect.

3. *Amos v. Bd. of Sch. Dirs.*, 408 F. Supp. 765 (E.D. Wis. 1976).