

RACE

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— to swear the oath of office on a King James Bible.

His own family Bible, however, was packed away for the move from Springfield, Ill., to Washington. So the clerk of the Supreme Court, William Thomas Carroll, acquired a new book — small, covered in purpled calfskin, emblazoned with a single gold crown on the cover — and signed it into official use.

Late in the day, the good book was returned to the Library of Congress, where no president would require its official use for 148 years, until Jan. 20.

On that Tuesday, chilly and clear, with the completed Capitol building now a silent witness to a history of war, depression, deprivation, progress, plenty and inspiration — along with occasional measures of both exhaustion and enlightenment — Barack Obama placed his hand on Lincoln's Bible and became president.

That was six weeks ago, and what it all means to Americans here on Florida's southwest coast, now that the dust of a momentous day has settled, depends on their own adventures in the history leading to this first week in March 2009.

As a country still precocious, still uncertain how far it can reach, still more sculptor's clay than sculpture, and still an unfinished model of various races cast in the mold of a single citizenry, we are predictable only by our experience — at least judging by the voices Florida Weekly chooses this week to reflect on our progress.

We spoke to men and women ranging in age from their 20s to their 80s, asking them a few simple questions: Has Barack Obama's presidency resulted in a different level of dialogue between blacks and whites, so far? What difference might it ultimately make? Was his swearing in on Mr. Lincoln's Bible, 148 years after the 16th president himself placed his hand on that book, merely an affectation of presidential etiquette or, instead, an important symbol of a great nation's progress?

And finally, are Americans afraid or unwilling to talk about race, or to dwell on the issue much?

Here are some of their answers.

John Agnew, 75



AGNEW

A retired medical doctor and columnist for The News-Press in Fort Myers.

I was born in Miami in 1933, so I grew up with "back-of-the-bus" for blacks, with a separate downtown, separate bathrooms and water fountains. Obviously things have changed. But I believe they've changed officially from the top down, but not really changed from the bottom up.

I've lived here (in Fort Myers) since 1965 and I have one black acquaintance. Just one. I had a number of black patients when I was in practice, and I got along with them just fine. I liked and respected them, I enjoyed them, I enjoyed taking care of them.

That doesn't mean there's any social interaction.

I see these ads for Budweiser beer, with black and white people having a good time together, and I never see that outside of the television.

I used to give lectures in elementary schools about smoking and health on a regular basis, when I was still practicing. The black kids would sit on one side and the white kids would sit on the other side. That probably has not changed.

I don't see anything unnatural about that, necessarily — people going where they feel most comfortable. But if, from the point of view of kids, white kids have white friends and black kids have black friends, then they won't really mix.

Where will we be 25 to 50 years from now?

Probably in the same place.

But I do think President Obama has a great opportunity, especially living in Washington, to convince black kids that it is not shameful to get a good education, and to get rid of the idea that getting educated is merely acting white.

We have an opportunity for the president to make a real inroad in that, and to make schools that produce better outcomes.

If that happens, we'll start having more actual friendships between black and white people.

As for the Lincoln Bible, I see that as merely a symbol and nothing more — and really not very important. It brought to light that Lincoln thought black people could never operate on the same level as whites, he thought they were inherently inferior, he recommended that if they were freed from slavery, they should be sent to another country (Liberia, in Africa).

Using that Bible brought up those old stories, which nobody had mentioned for a long time, unless they were studying history and the Civil War.

In terms of race relations, I think his election is the greatest thing that can possibly have happened — as long as the president is successful.

Peter Dennis, 30



DENNIS

A Naples attorney. A graduate of Fort Myers High School, the University of Florida, and New York University Law School.

Southwest Florida is interesting. Fort Myers is extremely segregated, still, and Collier County is a different world. While a lot of people in middle or upper incomes come down from the North, not a lot of minorities move here, so we're in danger of Fort Myers becoming even more ghettoized.

And we have to face it here — we live in the South, in Robert E. Lee County. Every time I come to court in Lee County and park in the garage, I have to walk past Robert E. Lee's bust.

So we do have northern transplants who are African Americans, but not many. And I don't see a lot of integration outside the workplace. That's not to say it doesn't happen, especially among professionals, but it may not be common.

Look at churches here. Or, for example, where do you get your hair cut? If you're African American, and new, you can't just walk into the nearest First Choice. It doesn't work that way.

I feel a certain amount of lament there aren't more African Americans here — especially in Collier. I'm the only one of about 30 lawyers in my firm, which has made a great effort to recruit minorities, but what can you do to change that? What will make this attractive over Atlanta, Orlando or Miami, where there is diversity? It's natural to feel more comfortable where people don't feel singled out. Not everybody wants to be a trendsetter.

As for the Lincoln Bible and where we'll be in 50 years, I'm not certain.

Lincoln is known as the emancipator, and since both Lincoln and Obama are from Illinois, there are good historical reasons why you can draw parallels between the two on that Bible.

I don't want to talk down to the African American community here, and I am an outsider too, in many ways, but as I visit elementary schools I think a lot of African American kids are in need of positive role models to enforce the notion in them that anything is possible. I think they lack the idea, sometimes, that they ARE going to college, they CAN be president or an attorney — that they CAN be absolutely anything they want to apply themselves to.

So we have a long road ahead of us in Southwest Florida. I think we need to recognize that.

And instead of our community leaders being more focused on development and

growth, maybe they should think about their constituents.

For example, the closing of the Publix on U.S. 41 in Fort Myers, which moved into downtown on McGregor Boulevard. It hadn't been renovated in years, unlike every other Publix I know about. They used that to justify closing it, but so many people relied on it because it was within walking distance. Our city leaders allowed it to disappear. They may have cried foul afterwards, but they did nothing at the time. Now it's a mile away, but a mile on foot, or a mile in a taxi if you're poor or old?

That directly affected people of a lower socio-economic level, and that often means African Americans. And it made me angry.

Anita Dennis, 64



DENNIS

Co-author, with her husband of 41 years, Benjamin Dennis, of the book, "Slaves to Racism: An Unbroken Chain from America to Liberia."

We live in the Villas in Fort Myers, which is becoming more integrated than it used to be — there are two other interracial couples a block or so over from us.

Our daughter, Winona, is a housewife, mother and grandmother in Nashville. Our oldest son, Dr. Benjamin N. Dennis — his tribal name is Ngombu Tejjeh — is a senior economic advisor on the council of economic advisors to President Obama, with a specialty in international trade. Our middle son, Joseph — his tribal name is Boaki Kovah — is a commercial property underwriter for AIG in Chicago. And our youngest, Peter — his tribal name is Morlu — is an attorney in Naples. He recently named his son Benjamin Morlu, after my husband.

It's too soon to tell if the Obama presidency is having an effect on race for blacks and whites here.

We noticed a very big change when we came here in 1992 from the northern Midwest.

There, we were on university campuses (Mr. Dennis was a professor of sociology). In Flint, Michigan, our children had black teachers in gifted schools. There were black judges, and I led a sheltered life.

Here, while my sons were growing up I didn't realize a lot of the things they faced, although being light-skinned, like President Obama, probably made it easier. But here, unlike in Michigan, black people are isolated in Dunbar. They don't have the education, and that's still the case, just like it was in 1992.

And for me, being interracial married, it wasn't easy to choose someone to be comfortable with as a friend. We do have a marvelous community within our St. Michael's Lutheran Church, and they have really loved us. They are our social group, basically.

So I've been a housewife and homemaker, and for 14 years I've been working with my husband on this book.

One thing that struck me during the election of Obama is that everyone, they all said, "I never thought I would see this day." Not just black people, but white people said it.

Of course when you look at Barack Obama, he's not a typical American black. Our boys have a lot in common with him, since they have a white mother and an African father, and there was this whole issue, is he black enough, is he coming from the same viewpoint as most other African Americans. He cannot be solely for black interests, he has to be for all American interests.

Living here, my husband and I had to deal with race questions. When we would walk the beach holding hands, white retirees would give us a dirty look. At the doctor's office, if we were both standing at the window, the nurse or receptionist would say to me, "May I help you?" and then turn to my husband and say, "What do you want?"

We are never assumed to be married, or together. The first question to us is always, "How did you two meet?" which is not the first question posed to most couples. I don't

really resent it, I understand why, but it illustrates race relations here. An interracial marriage is still an anomaly.

My husband will be 80 in June, and he has liver cancer. He's in the care of Hope Hospice now (while living at home). He was the best thing that happened to me in my life. Our parents, especially mine, were totally against our marriage and didn't speak to us for more than two years after, but our boys grew up knowing Grandma and Grandpa, I would say through a triumph of love and Christianity. We came down here to take care of them.

My husband opened a whole new life for me. I am an Ohio farm girl who married this professor and discovered he had a different identity, he was a hereditary Mende chief (a Liberian tribe), and when we traveled home to Africa I rode in a chief's hammock through a high forest, I was accepted into the Mende tribe in a three-day ceremony, so in a sense I got to live anthropology.

My whole perspective changed. If I could divide America into two groups, it would be people who have traveled overseas and people who have never left their hometown or their home area.

Anthony Thomas, 25



THOMAS

A graduate of Fort Myers High School, he is a college student, activist and native son of the traditional black neighborhood in Fort Myers, Dunbar.

I feel pretty good about where we are after the president's election.

I think we made tremendous progress. In the city of Fort Myers, Obama received 60 percent of the vote, and that's not because 60 percent of voters are black. A lot of white people voted for him.

So now, for somebody who lived in the community, somebody people knew, the response to President Obama would be very telling. We're planning, we're looking at the data, we'd like to run an African American for mayor.

But I also think that what (Attorney General Eric Holder) said is true — we may go to work together, but on weekends we're still a segregated society, like 50 years ago. Dr. Martin Luther King said 40 years ago, that the most segregated place in America is on Sunday morning in church. You go anywhere in the city of Fort Myers, and blacks go worship in their places mostly, and whites go to theirs.

The day after we elected President Obama, blacks went to their places of worship and shouted 'Glory Halleluiah!' and good people, whites, went to theirs and said, 'Oh Lord, what happened?'

But that's progress.

Here in Lee County, we still don't get the idea of fair representation, which is what more single-member districts do for people. The ACLU is coming down next month, and filing a lawsuit to get single-member districts.

We were just saying, 'Hey, you don't have to agree with the idea of seven or nine single-member districts, but just put it on the ballot and see what the people say.'

But Tammy Hall, Ray Judah and Bob Janes, said, No, we're not even going to let it go on the ballot.

Frank Mann said, I don't support single member districts, but I will put it on the ballot.

The way it stands, you should not have only five people from only five districts representing more than 600,000 citizens.

So elections matter. This election matters. And for me, for someone who was in Washington on the mall when President Obama was sworn in, when he came out and put his hand on the Lincoln Bible, it was significant for me.

This is somebody who is the heir to The Great Emancipator. He would have been a slave 150 years ago. Now he's standing in front of the Capitol, putting his hand on that Bible, and he picked it because it tells the American story. It was a redemptive moment. ■