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Cooling the heat from 1961's summer

By Darrell Laurant



The summer of 1961 in Lynchburg was long and hot.

True, every Central Virginia summer is long and hot. But thanks to a local collision with history, that July and August 49 years ago were even more stifling than usual. Harry Dillard remembers it well.

"My brother and I would go to the Jefferson Park pool every day," he said. "We'd eat lunch at the snack bar and just hang out, keeping cool."

Unfortunately for the Dillards — and for hundreds of other pool-seeking kids, black and white, all over Lynchburg — that diversion came to a sudden halt on the Fourth of July.

Olivet C. Thaxton, a local civil rights crusader, had chosen Independence Day to bring six children to the whites-only Miller Park pool in an attempt to integrate it. He was met at the entrance by park Superintendent Floyd McKenna, police Chief R.O. Brooks and City Manager Bob Morrison. If Thaxton persisted, Morrison told him, he would be forced to close all the pools in the city. Thaxton persisted.

Harry Dillard, 10 years old at the time, didn't have to wait to hear the news on television.

"Some guys riding by on bikes told us," Dillard recalled. "They said all of the pools had been shut down."

I bring all this up because Lynchburg mayor Joan Foster alluded to it July 31 when she dedicated a new "sprayground" at Riverside Park, site of the last of the three pools to be closed in 1961. The sight of dozens of kids of all skin hues frolicking in the water provided a mute validation of how far we have

come since then.

My impression has always been that the pools were filled in immediately that long-ago July, but Dillard set me straight.

"At first, they were only drained," he said, "and we all thought it was going to be a temporary thing. Every day, we'd ride our bikes over there, hoping to see the water back in. But as it turned out, when they pulled the plug on the Jefferson Park pool, they pulled it forever."

"It was a devastating thing to the kids in that neighborhood," said Leslie Camm, a retired Lynchburg school principal.

The Rev. Bev Cosby did his part to cool tensions (literally), opening the pool at Camp Kum-Ba-Yah to children of all races.

"I went out there some," said Dillard. "It was really good of him to do that."

Still, it wasn't the same as a neighborhood pool. I have fond memories of spending summer days at the public pool in my hometown of Syracuse, N.Y., and I can only imagine how the young people of Lynchburg felt when that pleasure was denied them.

"I've found that it's a generational thing," Dillard said. "Most of the kids who grew up before 1961 learned how to swim, and those after that didn't."

Of course, it's easy to look back from our (presumably) more enlightened vantage point and see the city fathers of the day as vindictive, small-minded and racist. And it can't be denied that many of the movers and shakers in 1961 belonged to country clubs where the pools were never drained that summer.

Yet Harry Dillard, even then, had the gift of seeing both sides.

I once talked with O.C. Thaxton about his attempted "wade-in," and he remembered: "A crowd of whites had gathered, and a line of police was between us and them. Around the outside was a group of black people. Some of the whites were yelling at us, and I think if the police hadn't been there, it could have been a lot worse. I'd prepared myself to take the beating, if they'd beat me."

In other words, Dillard says now, "I think Bob Morrison was truly worried about the violence that could happen if the pools stayed open. It was a tricky situation."

As for the kids, he recalls: "Our parents told us that all this was necessary, that it (the wade-in) would lead to better things in the future. But we didn't really care about that. All we wanted to do was go swimming."

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