On May 17, 2004, numerous speeches and memorials reminded the entire nation of the fiftieth anniversary of the Brown v. Board of Education case, which ended legal segregated schools in the United States. Public television produced a five-part series on the continual impact of the decision. This landmark decision significantly altered the fabric of American life, not only in the South, but also throughout the nation, including Utah.

Although most Utah leaders, including Governor J. Bracken Lee, remained silent on the Supreme Court decision, they failed to understand that the Brown decision would have ramifications far beyond public education. Both the state of Utah and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had serious discrimination issues in the 1950s. Since the population of Utah is overwhelmingly one religion, the LDS faith, the members of the church, as citizens had accepted racial discrimination as a way of life. As a consequence of both belief and custom, Utah's citizens were blindsided by the Brown decision of the Supreme Court and its ultimate impact.

In early January 1954, a famous African-American opera star, Marian Anderson, came to Utah to perform in concert. Earlier in her career, Anderson gained fame because she was

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1 For a political biography of one of Utah's most colorful politicians, see Dennis Lythgoe, Let 'em Holler: The Political Biography of J. Bracken Lee. (Salt Lake City: Utah State Historical Society, 1982). Lee witnessed first hand racism and intolerance in his hometown of Price, Utah, where the Ku Klux Klan was active in the 1920s and where, in June 1925, an itinerant black miner was lynched by a frenzied mob.
denied the opportunity to perform at Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C. The Daughters of the American Revolution, who owned the facility, maintained a segregated organization. Eleanor Roosevelt, the first lady of the land, arranged for the concert to be moved to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Throughout her career, Anderson had confronted segregation and discrimination. Utah proved to be no different. In Salt Lake City, her sponsors found lodging in the Hotel Utah, but Anderson had to agree to use the freight elevator and receive her meals in her room. Later that week in Logan, she stayed in the home of the Utah State Agricultural College (now Utah State University) music professor Walter Welti because public accommodations could not be obtained.

Marian Anderson’s experience was one of many Utah examples of racial discrimination that also included other noted entertainers. Paul Robeson, Harry Belafonte, Ella Fitzgerald, and Lionel Hampton all experienced hotel and restaurant discrimination in Salt Lake City. Even Ralph Bunche, American Ambassador to the United Nations, was offered the same treatment as Anderson at the Hotel Utah — freight elevator and meals in your room — likewise Congressman Adam Clayton Powell and his wife, actress Hazel Scott. Visiting ministers and church leaders usually had to stay in private homes. The Newhouse Realty Company, owner of the former four hundred-room Newhouse Hotel located on the corner of 400 South and Main Streets, denied Bishop Osmonde Walker of the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church admission.

In 1954, Utah's state and community statutes as well as accepting individual practices, contained numerous examples of blatant discrimination. At the very time the United States was trying to win a Cold War and influence emerging non-white nations that the American example of democracy should be followed, Anderson's experience and those of the others illustrated the reality of racism.

Also in January 1954, President David O. McKay of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, whose office was only a few yards east of the Hotel Utah, decided to add South Africa to his itinerary for a lengthy trip that already included Europe and South America. While his home state and the buildings the LDS church owned, like the Hotel Utah, practiced racial discrimination, McKay had to deal with new segregation issues in the far-off nation of South Africa, which had recently incorporated apartheid as a policy to separate all races. McKay confided to his secretary that the issue he had to confront was “what to do about the present practice in South

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2 Salt Lake Tribune, January 10, 1954.
3 Ronald G. Coleman, “Blacks in Utah History: An Unknown Legacy,” in Helen Z. Papanikolas, ed., The Peoples of Utah (Salt Lake City: Utah Historical Society, 1976), 136. Willis Hansen, long-time manager of the Newhouse Hotel recalled in 1982 of Duke Ellington's attempted stay at the Newhouse Hotel. “Oh there was Duke Ellington, too. He was the first Black to stay there. That was when Blacks weren’t allowed. They sneaked him in, but the management found out and asked him to leave.” Deseret News, February 2, 1982.
Africa of not conferring the priesthood.” Intent on carrying out a world-wide vision for the church that included building temples in England, Switzerland, and New Zealand, McKay hoped to expand the influence of the church throughout the world.

The separate worlds in which Marian Anderson and David McKay resided and influenced changed dramatically on May 17, 1954, when the United States Supreme Court unanimously declared that segregated public schools were no longer legal. In May of 1954, only four months after the events described above, neither Anderson nor McKay anticipated the full impact of the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka decision. Most Utahns, because there were no segregated schools in the state, saw the case as irrelevant, but they were wrong. The court’s decision helped set in motion a chain of events that ultimately saw both the state of Utah and the LDS church alter their legal and theological positions relative to race.

Racial segregation had been legal in the United States since the Plessy v. Ferguson decision in a Louisiana case in 1896. The Louisiana law that was upheld by the Supreme Court restricted blacks and whites from sitting together in railroad or streetcars. Theoretically, the facilities were “separate but equal.” However, the reality is that the court decision prompted a deluge of segregation laws that separated the races in every aspect of life. The Plessy decision restricted the interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U. S. Constitution. Consequently, many states, including Utah had segregation laws affecting housing, public accommodations, theaters, and restaurants. Many more states also had restrictive laws.5

World War II had a dramatic impact on conceptions of race and philosophies of racial superiority. The United States and its allies had defeated Nazi Germany and the Hitlerian extreme doctrines on race. Soldiers, diplomats, and journalists had witnessed the dramatic and traumatic impact of the holocaust in Europe and instances in Asia like the rape of Nanking in China. Race, ethnicity, and prejudice had led to human genocide. The irony and contradiction for the United States was that this nation fought World War II with a segregated military force. That fact was not lost on many Americans of all races who fought in the war and helped establish the peace at the war’s conclusion. It is important to note that during the war, thousands of Americans relocated to where military related jobs were more plentiful. Utah felt the effects of this, to a small degree, as federal facilities supporting the war effort grew rapidly, primarily in the Ogden and Hill Air

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Force Base area and some African-Americans found employment in Tooele County, Clearfield, and other facilities.

In 1946 President Harry Truman, under national and international pressure, appointed a Civil Rights Commission to recommend national action relative to all minority citizens. The Commission reported that the United States could not assume a position of moral leadership in the world as long as the nation condoned racial segregation. They recommended that the President take executive action and also push for legislation to address the issue. Truman responded to the commission’s report by integrating the military and federal employment by Executive Order in 1948. This decision had a direct impact on African-Americans in Utah because of the defense facilities at Hill Field, Dugway, Tooele, Ogden, and Clearfield. Utah’s African-American population grew by more than 50 percent between 1948 and 1960. (The U.S. Census figures of the African-American population in Utah for 1950 was 2,729 and for 1960 was 4,148.) Simultaneously, other aspects of segregated America changed because of direct action by individuals and organizations. Jackie Robinson and Branch Rickey, owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers, by integrating major league baseball in 1947, dramatically documented that times were changing. The success of Robinson opened opportunities for young African-Americans to participate in minor leagues as well and this eventually affected the Class C Pioneer League with affiliates in Salt Lake City and Ogden. The 1953 Ogden Reds, led by future Hall of Fame outfielder African-American Frank Robinson, won the
Pioneer League pennant. As early as 1953, Overton Curtis and Zeke Smith, two black football players, played for Utah State Agricultural College. Weber Junior College and the University of Utah also moved to include black athletes on their sports teams.6

In spite of Truman's executive decisions and some direct action, officials of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chose public education as their main avenue to seek to destroy legal segregation. Thurgood Marshall, who served as legal director of the NAACP from 1940 to 1961, and his mentor Charles Houston, a Howard University law professor, decided that segregated public education easily documented the effects of discrimination on lives. (Marshall later served on the U. S. Supreme Court for twenty-four years.) Gradually, they worked to strike down racial barriers in professional schools and graduate programs. In such decisions as Sweat v. Painter and McLaurin v. Oklahoma, the Supreme Court consistently sided with the NAACP attorneys as they established precedent for documented educational discrimination. By 1950 Marshall and Houston turned their focus to public education at all levels from kindergarten through high school. Earlier, they had challenged issues of equal pay and benefits. A year later, attorneys had five plaintiffs who had been denied admission to white schools, willing to appeal negative local school board decisions all the way to the United States Supreme Court.7 At that time twenty-one states and the District of Columbia maintained segregated schools. Utah was not one of those states. While these cases proceeded through the judicial system, other aspects of discrimination and segregation became focal points across the nation and in Utah.

An examination of Utah education law and practice in 1954 revealed that the Beehive State did not legally discriminate against minority students, but there were instances of black college graduates not hired as teachers in the schools, and one female student was denied the opportunity to student-teach in the Salt Lake City area. As of May 1954, the NAACP reported that no African-American had taught at any level in the Utah public education system, although the U. S. Bureau of Indian Affairs hired Ruby Price to teach at the Intermountain Indian School in Brigham City in 1950. The first African-American public school teacher was hired in October 1954 in the Ogden district.8

6 It is interesting to note that Weber College, Utah State University, and the University of Utah all reached national prominence by the late 1950s and early 1960s in part because of African-American athletes. Although there was some serious resentment expressed by alumni and townspeople, the success of the teams put Utah in a positive national picture. Weber won the Junior College National Championship in 1959, USU and Utah were both ranked in the top ten in 1960. Allen Holmes, Billy McGill, Cornell Green, Tyler Wilbon and Harold Theus all from Arizona or California were recruited to the state.
8 Wallace R. Bennett, “Negro in Utah,” Utah Law Review (1953): 340-48. The first branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in Utah was organized in 1919, Ronald Coleman, “Blacks in Utah History,” 139. For the hiring of Ruby Price, see Salt Lake Tribune, March 27,
Discrimination was rampant in the hotel and restaurant industry in Utah. A Utah Senate Committee was established to investigate discrimination against minorities. The committee, which was called the “Selvin Committee” named for its chair Sol J. Selvin, distributed questionnaires to employers, trade union officials, government officials, and employees. One of the committee's conclusions reported in January 1947 was “there is a substantial body of unfair and discriminatory practices in the state's industry, which operates to deny minority groups among our citizens equal rights to gainful employment.” The returns from the committee's questionnaires indicated that an enactment of a law would reduce some of the discriminatory policies within the state's employment sector. Even though a 1948 law stated that refusal of admittance without just cause made the innkeeper guilty of a misdemeanor, de facto segregation policies persisted for another decade. Legislative attempts to revise the law and pass stronger civil rights legislation failed earlier in 1945 and 1947, and later in 1949 and 1953. Local real estate attempts to create segregated neighborhoods in both Ogden and Salt Lake City failed, although the proposals did end up in the courts. A 1954 report indicated that restrictive covenants and

1994. Price was later named Utah Mother of the Year in 1977 and in 1989 was chairwoman of the Davis County Republican Party.


attempted property prohibitions proved ineffective in Utah. There were two significant cases in the court system in 1954 that involved ramifications of the concept of equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment. Both the *Gaddis Investment Company v. Morrison* and *Tucker v. Washington Terrace* cases dealt with developer and homeowner attempts to restrict housing projects to those “of the Caucasian race.”11 Twenty-two residents living in G Court, Army Way, filed the Washington Terrace housing case. Samuel H. King, spokesperson for the group, stated that the Washington Terrace Non-Profit Housing Corporation was “resorting to racial discrimination,” and was attempting to move African-American families from a present “favorable” location to another less desirable location within the Washington Terrace community.12

While numerous housing restrictions existed, more blatant discrimination occurred in the private sector beyond hotels and restaurants. Almost all bowling alleys, movie theaters, dance halls, taverns, social clubs, and recreational facilities were segregated. Blacks had their own Masonic Order, Eagles, Elks, and Odd Fellows lodges and certainly their own religious congregations. There were a few public complaints aired about blatant discrimination. In a letter to the editor of the *Salt Lake Tribune*, July 7, 1955, Marion L. Mills, a Black military veteran and student who later worked for the U.S. Post Office wrote: “Yes, a Negro problem does exist in Salt Lake City. Negroes are required to occupy balcony seats in many local theaters. Negroes are not served in many cafes or other eating establishments. Many types of employment are closed to Negroes. Most night clubs, bars, etc., do not admit Negroes as customers.” Indeed, much of basic life in Utah was segregated and exclusive. However, in 1954 Utah education as well as labor unions did not practice racial separation. On the other hand, almost all of Utah’s recreational facilities were segregated until Robert Freed and his family purchased Lagoon and later, Rainbow Gardens, which was located on Main Street between Fourth and Fifth South streets in Salt Lake City. They opened these previously segregated amusement and entertainment facilities to all races around 1950. Freed believed in open access, private and public. He wanted to attract entertainers and their fans to both areas and believed in that policy.13 Freed once said, “One of my most satisfying experiences was when Lagoon opened its doors to people of all races.”14

In the area of work, Utah labor unions had abandoned segregation and the National Congress of Industrial Organizations had tendered a friend of the court brief in the Brown case. Although union numbers were small in Utah, the railroad brotherhoods offered an affirmative recruitment of

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12 *Ogden Standard-Examiner*, October 16, 1952. Federal judge Willis W. Ritter dismissed the case when he determined that there had been no violation of the plaintiffs constitutional rights.
13 Robert Freed, Lagoon Photograph Collection, USU Special Collections and Archives.
workers. Many small black owned businesses, especially in Ogden, offered additional employment opportunities, but the largest minority employer in 1954 was the federal government. According to the NAACP, in 1954 there was only one African-American lawyer and one African-American physician practicing in the entire state. There were three nurses in Salt Lake City hospitals. All hospitals admitted openly and fairly, but restricted black patients to private rooms. Salt Lake City area hospitals maintained segregated blood in their blood banks even though all medical knowledge denied racial distinction among blood types.

While the NAACP and other organizations chipped away at public segregation practices, individual beliefs and concerns could not be altered by law. An example of this reality was Utah’s anti-miscegenation law passed in 1953 which held that any marriage between Caucasian and minority citizens was null and void. The statute even went so far as to enumerate that mulattos, quadroons, or octoroons, were considered black. One of the nation’s most prohibitive laws, it fueled the fire of prejudice. It is no wonder that W. Miller Barbour, a field director for the National Urban League, published a report in the November 1954 Frontier magazine stating, “In large areas of Utah, Nevada, and northern Arizona, and in most of the smaller towns, the discrimination is almost as severe as in the south.” And regarding trailer parks, “We encountered complete rejection in Utah.”

The same month, in a “Symposium on the Negro in Utah” held at Weber College in Ogden, Harmon O. Cole, who described himself as “a person of Negroid ancestry,” confirmed Barbour’s report:

We are not free to eat or to sleep where we want, nor, in a theater, can we sit where we choose; we are even, in some instances, refused the common courtesy of going openly to a hotel to see a Caucasian friend . . . A few months ago, my wife was asked to come to a hotel in Salt Lake City to call on a Caucasian friend. She was asked at the desk to take the service elevator to her friend's room, since Negroes were not allowed to use the passenger elevator.

At the same symposium, attorney Wallace R. Bennett reviewed the state legislature’s repeated failure to pass legislation that would outlaw racial discrimination: “In 1945, an equal rights act was introduced in the [Utah] Senate which would have expressly prohibited “discrimination on account of race in admission to any place of public accommodation.” The bill died in committee, however, as it did again in 1947, 1949, and 1951. No effort was made in 1953.” According to Bennett, the problems facing Utah workers.
African-Americans did not generate much interest in Utah because the population was small and there were no segregated schools. He did conclude that Utah should be concerned because there was so much blatant discrimination in housing, lodging, restaurants, marriage law, and religion. He also said that the issue needed to be discussed and progress demonstrated because of the national press and its focus on Utah and LDS church issues.

Utah's history often cannot separate itself from Mormon history. The legislature, most elected officials, judges, lawyers, builders, and property owners are members of the LDS church. True or not, the perception is often that Utah law reflects church wishes. As a result, in order to understand Utah's 1954 mood, it is essential to examine internal decisions and discussions within the LDS church. President David O. McKay and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had to face the reality of a changing world. As noted earlier, McKay intended to alter the direction of the church by building strong membership in foreign lands and discouraging the concept of "gathering" to North America. Issues of race preceded his 1954 trip to South Africa. If Utah's civil rights record could be traced in part to LDS church policy, then the religious organization had serious problems as it contemplated expanding its influence. Although these issues have a lengthy history, some of the twentieth century events prior to the 1954 court ruling deserve special highlighting.

David O. McKay had served as an Apostle since 1907 and as an educator, dealt with generations of young questioning students. He had personally confronted the issue of priesthood denial to blacks while in Hawaii in the 1920s and obviously felt a bit uncomfortable. According to his journals, McKay recalled his experience in Hawaii:

I first met this problem in Hawaii in 1921. A worthy [Black] man had married a Polynesian woman. She was faithful in the Church. They had a large family everyone of whom was active and worthy. My sympathies were so aroused that I wrote home to President Grant asking if he would please make an exception so we could ordain that man to the Priesthood. He wrote back saying 'David, I am as sympathetic as you are, but until the Lord gives us a revelation regarding that matter, we shall have to maintain the policy of the Church.'

One of McKay's real problems was that LDS leadership is based on seniority and age. He and his colleagues were products of their time. Many church members were oblivious to a formal policy on race.

J. Reuben Clark, McKay's Second Counselor, had a highly distinguished legal government and diplomatic career before being named to the First Presidency in 1933. Brilliant and dominating, Clark basically ran the church during the last few years of Heber J. Grant's administration and that of George Albert Smith, both of whom suffered from ill health. Clark

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18 "Minutes of a Special Meeting by President David O. McKay, 17th January 1954," in David O. McKay Diaries, January 19, 1954, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah. The author is indebted to Gregory Prince whose forthcoming biography of David O. McKay includes an entire chapter on Civil Rights, which Prince shared with this author.
authorized Salt Lake City church leaders to join organizations “whose purpose is to restrict and control Negro settlement.” A year later, he discussed with President Smith a proposal to use chapels for LDS meetings “to prevent Negroes from becoming neighbors.”

Henry D. Moyle, who became McKay's counselor, was on record as trying to persuade the Department of Defense to halt plans to deploy troops to Tooele because “there will be two or three hundred Negro families in this contingent.”

Others such as Joseph Fielding Smith and Harold B. Lee had both written and spoken in defense of segregation. Ezra Taft Benson, an apostle who served as Dwight D. Eisenhower's Secretary of Agriculture, remained publicly silent on civil rights, but privately saw the entire movement as communist inspired. Finally, another apostle, Mark E. Petersen, told church education employees that, “I think the Lord segregated the Negro and who is man to change that segregation?”

In this type of atmosphere, President McKay faced a very difficult task.

McKay inherited a specific problem that ultimately made the entire nation aware of Utah and LDS attitudes on race. The policy remained an obscure issue for another two decades, until the First Presidency instructed Heber Meeks, President of the Southern States Mission, to investigate the

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possibility of proselytizing in Cuba. Meeks sought the advice of his friend Lowry Nelson, a native of Ferron, Utah who had taught at both Brigham Young University and Utah State Agricultural College, written an important study entitled *Mormon Village*, and who was considered the father of the field of rural sociology. Nelson had spent a year studying rural life in Cuba right after World War II. Meeks wrote: “I would appreciate your opinion as to the advisability of doing missionary work particularly in the rural sections of Cuba, knowing, of course, our concept of the Negro and his position as [to] the Priesthood.” Nelson, who had left Utah during the New Deal, was stunned by the letter and quickly responded. “Your letter is the first intimation I have had that there was a fixed doctrine on this point. I had always known that certain statements had been made by authorities regarding the status of the Negro but I had never assumed that they constituted an irrevocable doctrine.”

Deeply troubled, Nelson wrote to George Albert Smith, church president, asking for clarification of the policy and adding that: “The many good friends of mixed blood through no fault of theirs incidentally -- which I have in the Caribbean and who know me to be a Mormon would be shocked indeed if I were to tell them my Church relegated them to an inferior status.”

Lowry Nelson's innocent, but penetrating interrogation, caused the First Presidency, including Second Counselor David O. McKay, to respond. The church leaders rationalized the policy as part of “the doctrines that our birth into this life and the advantages under which we may be born have a relationship in the life heretofore.” The letter stated that the policy had originated with Joseph Smith, and labeled it a “doctrine of the Church, never questioned by any of the Church leaders.” Realizing the inaccuracy of calling Smith the originator, Nelson noted, “As much as I was 'stunned' at Heber Meeks' question . . . this letter from the First Presidency was shocking . . . There is no doubt in my mind that [J. Reuben Clark] drafted this letter to me.”

Although just a signatory to the First Presidency letter to Nelson, McKay penned his own thoughts on the subject several months later in response to a correspondent. He cited one scriptural precedent for the policy, a single verse in the LDS canon, *Book of Abraham*, that for him appeared to answer the “who” if not the “why” of the policy, but stated that the complete rationale lay in the pre-mortal existence of human spirits. Unlike his more conservative General Authority colleagues, however, he did not...
pretend to know the details, and he declined
to invoke either a “less valiant” or a “curse of
Cain” explanation. In further departures from
these colleagues he allowed for the eventual
reversal of the practice without restricting it
to a post-mortem period and, most significant-
ly, he declined to call it a “doctrine.” To him
there was a distinct difference between a “policy” in the church, which he
saw as conditional and thus changeable, and a “doctrine,” which was
immutable. The distinction was lost on his colleagues, but was crucial in the
final months of McKay’s life.27

Lowry Nelson decided to let the issue drop and he returned to the
University of Minnesota. In his memoirs, Nelson recalled how he thrust
himself back into the discussion of Mormonism and race, “in 1952, a friend
in Salt Lake City, sent me a clipping from the Church Section of the Deseret
News that set me off again. The story had to do with two missionaries in
South Africa who were asked by a woman church member on her
deathbed to do her ‘work’ in the Temple when the boys returned to Salt
Lake. Since she lived in that part of the world, the men had to make sure
that her blood was not ‘tainted’ before they could proceed to gratify her
dying wish.”28 As Nelson read how the woman’s genealogy revealed that she

27 Gregory Prince’s forthcoming biography of David O. McKay the chapter on Civil Rights.
28 Nelson, In the Direction of His Dreams, 340.
was born in Holland and so her request could be granted. The *Church News* showed a photograph of the former missionaries and their wives rejoicing and Nelson decided to act. He wrote an article entitled “Mormons and the Negro” and sent it to the *Nation* magazine. For the first time, the church's official policy on the priesthood appeared in national print “for the world to see.” The African-American press spread the story widely and Nelson was chastised by many of his liberal Mormon friends. He wrote that, “I figured there would never be any change in the Negro policy until the facts were widely known and pressure could be brought to bear from without as well as from within.”

Consequently, when President McKay embarked on his 1954 tour of three continents, Europe, Africa and South America, there was no ambiguity in his mind as to the purpose for the second leg of his tour. On the long flight from England to South Africa he discussed the matter with his traveling secretary. “He said he had that problem to consider, what to do about the present practice in South Africa of not conferring the priesthood.”

Shortly after arriving in South Africa, McKay addressed a special meeting that included the mission president, LeRoy H. Duncan and the missionaries. In his remarks he said that, “To observe conditions as they are was one of the reasons that I wished to take this trip,” and then he immediately addressed the issue of priesthood. “For several years the Coloured question in South Africa has been called to the attention of the First Presidency. We have manuscripts, page after page, written on it.” He then spoke of the genesis of the church policy, but in more tentative terms than his predecessors. “Now I think there is an explanation for this racial discrimination, dating back to the pre-existent state.” He spoke tentatively about the permanence of the policy, saying that it would be followed “until the Lord gives us another revelation changing this practice.” With significance none of his audience could have appreciated, three times during his address he used the word “policy” or “practice” but never the word “doctrine.” Although he chose to not change the ban, he made a remarkable decision.

I am impressed that there are worthy men in the South African Mission who are being deprived of the Priesthood simply because they are unable to trace their genealogy out of this country. I am impressed that an injustice is being done to them. Why should every man be required to prove his lineage is free from Negro strain especially when there is no evidence of his having Negro blood in his veins? I should rather, much rather, make a mistake in one case and if it be found out afterwards suspend his activity in the Priesthood than to deprive 10 worthy men of the Priesthood . . . And so, if a man is worthy, is faithful in the Church and lives up to the principles of the Gospel, who has no outward evidence of a Negro strain, even though he might not be able to
trace his genealogy out of the country, the President of the Mission is hereby authorized to confer upon him the Priesthood.33

However, any degree of black lineage still meant no priesthood would be conferred. The announcement was not pre-determined, for two days later he sent a letter to his two counselors in which he first informed them of the change. Neither, however, was it impromptu, for in the letter he explained to them, “after careful observation and sincere prayer, I felt impressed to modify the present policy.”34 The effect on the mission was immediate. Shortly after returning to Salt Lake City, McKay received a report from the new mission president:

I wish you could have been with me in Johannesburg and Durban when I met with some of the Brethren and explained that it was possible for them to receive the priesthood. Tears ran down their cheeks and they were so overcome they could hardly speak. The Brethren were very humble and they expressed their willingness to serve the Lord and magnify the Priesthood. I know that your short visit here was the greatest blessing that had come to the South African Mission.”35

Although Utah papers or perhaps even Utah Mormons knew of his decision, the effect of the policy change extended beyond South Africa. By assuming the absence of Black lineage unless there was proof to the contrary (“innocent until proven guilty”), McKay established a precedent that he repeated many times throughout the remainder of his life, and thus opened doors that previously had been shut. In 1957, for example, a wedding in one of the LDS temples was in doubt because of an unproven rumor that the bride had had a Black grandmother. After some investigation of his own to confirm that there was no evidence to substantiate the rumor, McKay spoke to an associate who was advocating that the temple marriage proceed, and who later reported the conversation:


35 LeRoy H. Duncan to David O. McKay, February 23, 1954, David O. McKay Scrapbook #137, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah.
President McKay said, “When problems like this come to me I say to myself, Sometime I shall meet my Father-in-Heaven and what will he say?” And I said to him modestly, “He'll forgive you if you err on the side of mercy.” He smiled at that and said, “But don't you think it's too late to do something about it?” I said, “no sir.” He said, “Leave it to me.”

As welcome as these cases were and as equally important historically as they were, they did not address the fundamental basic question of the ban on ordination. It appears, however, that McKay's South African trip caused him, perhaps for the first time as President, to explore the possibility of abolishing the ban. Upon his return he took two apparently unprecedented initiatives. The first occurred only three weeks after his return when he met privately with Sterling M. McMurrin, who later (1963) wrote a statement on Civil Rights that was read in General Conference. McMurrin was under fire from two senior Apostles for his heretical beliefs when McKay called him and asked for the meeting in order to determine, firsthand, what was occurring. McMurrin was candid in describing his beliefs, one of which was his rejection of “the common Mormon doctrine that the Negroes are under a divine curse.” McKay's response caught him off-guard:

He said, “There is not now, and there never has been a doctrine in this Church that the Negroes are under a divine curse.” He insisted that there is no doctrine in the Church of any kind pertaining to the Negro. “We believe,” he said, “that we have scriptural precedent for withholding the priesthood from the Negro. It is a practice, not a doctrine, and the practice will some day be changed. And that's all there is to it.”

McMurrin elected not to publicize McKay's response, and McKay did not share his feelings with even his closest associates in the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, a fact that created a crisis in the closing months of McKay's life. Nonetheless, his statement to McMurrin indicated that he was approaching the subject of the priesthood ban in a manner different than any of his predecessors since Brigham Young.

The second initiative, apparently at the same time as the McMurrin episode, involved a direct frontal challenge to the policy. Leonard J. Arrington, who later became Church Historian, described it:

A special committee of the Twelve appointed by President McKay in 1954 to study the issue concluded that there was no sound scriptural basis for the policy but that the church membership was not prepared for its reversal . . . . Personally, I knew something about the apostolic study because I heard Adam S. Bennion, who was a member of the committee, refer to the work in an informal talk he made to the Mormon Seminar in Salt Lake City on May 13, 1954. McKay, Bennion said, had pled with the Lord without result and finally concluded the time was not yet ripe.
Three things are significant about Arrington’s account. First, as he had told McMurrin, McKay saw the issue as changeable policy rather than immutable doctrine. Second, as he had stated in South Africa, even though it was a policy that was changeable, it would require a revelation from the Lord to change it. He did not make it clear why he felt a revelation was necessary, that is, whether it was because the policy had been instituted by the Lord in the first place, or whether changing a man-made policy that had become so firmly entrenched would require the force of revelation to convince church members that it needed to be changed. And finally, apparently for the first time, he took the matter directly to the “Source.” It was not the last time that he did so, and not always did he achieve the same result. So, indeed, 1954 was a year of decision for the LDS church, the state of Utah, and the United States. However, the impact on the state and the church were a long time coming.

There were winds of potential change within the state and within the LDS church at the time of the Court decision, but no one seemed to realize that desegregated schools was only a first step toward a national civil rights movement.

The immediate educational response to the court decision was very positive. Utah educators applauded the decision. Dr. Allen Bateman, State Superintendent of Public Instruction stated: “The decision is fundamentally right. If we hope to maintain our position of leadership in the world today with the peoples of other races and nationalities, we must do everything possible to show that we are actually practicing equal treatment of all

The Esquire Club, ca. 1946, at the White City Ballroom, Ogden.
peoples within our country.”39 Superintendents from Salt Lake, Davis, Murray, and Granite school districts basically said that they had no problem with the decision and their districts already complied. The Salt Lake Tribune editorialized that patient gradualism could lead to a strengthened U.S. position in the world, but also said that since the court had moved in this direction for nearly a decade, everyone should be prepared. The Deseret News did not editorialize on the decision and only carried AP or UP stories of the national reaction to the Brown announcement.

In reality, Utah did not change any of its laws simply because of Brown v. Board of Education, although the Supreme Court ruled that segregated transportation, restaurants, and hotels were illegal based on interstate commerce and the Fourteenth Amendment. The Civil Rights Acts of 1964 actually brought about changes in the marriage laws and potential enforcement of desegregation as a violation of federal law. Fourteen years later, in 1978, the LDS church finally abandoned the policy of denying the priesthood to Africans or African-Americans. The church's position had hampered the state as it attempted to stay current with the nation. Utah's schools were affected in many ways. More and more minority graduates attended college and received degrees. In Utah, fifty years after Brown, there are numerous black school administrators, teachers, and other employees. The neighborhoods in Utah are diverse and multi-cultural. The large influx of Hispanics, Pacific Islanders, and other refugees have all benefitted from the Brown decision.40 Brown v. Board of Education was a major turning point in American history, and started the state, the nation, and the LDS church on a long, difficult path of fulfilling the dream of a nation of legal equality, and a church void of racial discrimination.

39 Salt Lake Tribune, May 18, 1954.