

February 17, 2024

To the Mayor and Town Council, Washington Grove.

The RASEC committee is right to address the Grove's history of racial bias and to attempt a public acknowledgment, reconciliation and resolution. But the committee is wrong to attempt to lay the sins of the past on Roy McCathran.

He was an energetic, caring and playful man. A community leader who, when called upon for a term as President of the Association in the troubled 20s, did his best to keep the order. For the next ten years he worked tirelessly with members of the Walker family and others to resolve the fatal flaws of the Association. Another twenty as our Mayor and head cheerleader.

Roy McCathran was born into the Jim Crow era. He lived in a segregated county, in a segregated state. In his time people believed in the concept of race. The World Book, a family-oriented encyclopedia, listed 'the seven races of man' along with a drawing showing their differing racial characteristics and their particular styles of dress.

Yet from the beginning the Grove had a vibrant interaction with Emory Grove. In the early years Emory Grove provided not just labor, but also the guardianship of the community during the winter months. In my time there was mutual respect between the two distinct, though unequal, neighborhoods.

As for the specifics of the charges against McCathran:

1. Blackface was considered, as hard as that is for us to fathom today, once considered an art form. Al Jolson, Bing Crosby and Mickey Rooney performed in blackface. Blackface was featured on early television shows. It was almost a given that a variety show would include a blackface act. Those at the time viewed it as caricature, parody, gross exaggeration for comic effect. The harm it did has not dissipated even yet. But in being part of a minstrel show with blackface, Roy McCathran was a performer, not the author.
2. Washington Grove was a private organization in an era that believed in exclusionary practices to keep their homogeneity intact. In the teens and twenties, once people were allowed to be residents without being stockholders, the community wrestled with how to maintain its exclusivity, employing lawyers to come up with convoluted wording to place on stock certificates, leases and deeds. Unless there's evidence otherwise, Roy McCathran, a patent attorney, had nothing to do with the wording of these covenants.

B. Peyton Brown was a Grove founder, devout Methodist, and camp meeting enthusiast. Brown Street is named for him. Yet he also participated in treaty-making with the plains Indians, treaties that directly led to the near destruction of tribes and the taking of their lands. Would we condemn Brown today for his good-faith efforts in favor of peace?

It is unwise to judge people of another era by the standards of today. It is unfair to single out Roy McCathran for censure when it was an entire people who fostered these abhorrent beliefs and practices.

Respectfully,

Philip K. Edwards