

The Battle to Integrate Palisades Amusement Park

by Kevin McCabe

Palisades Amusement Park in Fort Lee, New Jersey opened in 1898 and closed for good in 1971. One of its greatest attractions was the world's largest saltwater swimming pool. In the 1940s, the pool was for "members only," a not so subtle ploy to keep out local Blacks. By the late 1940s most of New Jersey's "public facilities" were racially integrated, as was most of Palisades Amusement Park. However, because the pool was a privately owned and operated institution, it was legally able to maintain segregation under civil rights laws in effect at that time.

Starting in the summer of 1947, the local African American community began to challenge the pool's Jim Crow policies. On July 13, 1947, Melba Valle, an African American woman, tried to gain admission to the pool using a ticket given her by a White friend. Valle was denied admission because she was not a member of the pool club and according to newspapers was "forcibly dragged and ejected" from the area. Shortly after the incident, a Committee of Racial Equality with many members from nearby New York City began demonstrating at the pool club demanding the admission of African Americans.



Protesting at the amusement park.



Less than a month after the Melba Valle incident, eleven members of the Committee of Racial Equality were arrested. Two members of the group were charged with an "unprovoked attack" on Patrolman Arthur Bruns that caused him to tear his pants. Five others were arrested for disorderly conduct when they demanded to know what had happened to the first two who were arrested. Another four were arrested for refusing to disperse.

Later that summer Melba Valle was part of a group of ten, including at least one White man, who sued Palisades Amusement Park and the local Chief of Police for \$270,000 in damages because of their discriminatory policies. The owner of the amusement park claimed "As a business proposition, had he allowed blacks into the pool, he would've lost a great deal of business with his white customers." In February 1948, a federal judge in Newark, New Jersey ruled against Valle and the demonstrators. According to the court's decision, "The full and equal enjoyment of the accommodations and facilities of a private amusement park is not a right or privilege secured by the Constitution. It necessarily follows that the [Civil Rights] Act, as heretofore construed may not be invoked." In response, the Committee of Racial Equality escalated its protests and twenty-two more people were arrested. The next year another suit was dismissed.

As part of the campaign to discredit the protests, the FBI was asked to investigate charges that the Communist Party was behind the demonstrations. These accusations proved to be unfounded. After three years of protests and bad publicity, Palisades Amusement Park quietly changed its exclusionary policy and admitted Blacks to the swimming area. Similar protests in Elizabeth, Atlantic City and Plainfield, New Jersey also contributed to an end to the segregation of public facilities in the north.