

Their View

70 years ago, Norton made civil rights history

The Roanoke Times

Norton, a coalfield town with a population that is 90% white, seems an unlikely place for a civil rights milestone, and yet it is.

It's also never gotten full credit for that milestone — the first integrated Little League baseball in the South. Norton did more than integrate its Little League baseball teams 70 years ago this summer; it also defiantly stood up to others in Virginia who insisted Norton kick its Black players off the team.

And yet history — at least in the form of “Long Time Coming,” a celebrated documentary aired on Netflix two years ago — records that the first integrated Little League baseball in the South came in Orlando in 1955. Norton, though, integrated its teams four years earlier — in 1951.

That deserves a historical marker — and a retelling that shows how Appalachia was on the forefront of civil rights while cities we now think of as more progressive were trying to punish Norton for being open-minded.

For these facts, we are indebted to the recollections of Wise County lawyer Frank Kilgore and a 1999 article in the Virginia Cavalcade magazine by Lann Malesky, who grew up in Norton and played on one of the Little League teams.

In 1951, Norton fielded its first Little League, under the direction of a young optometrist, Dr. Charles Litton. Malesky explained that Little League charters define a specific geographic coverage area so Norton's could have been drawn to exclude the Black section of town. It was not — so when try-outs were held that spring, Black boys turned out and were dutifully assigned to each of the teams. Norton didn't just have one integrated team, it had four.

Malesky remembers “a minor stir with some of my future teammates” and how “two local politicians, sensitive to the traditional ways in Virginia, advised Litton and his youthful cohorts to exclude the Black players and warned them that the state would not let them get away with integrating the teams.” This was not an idle threat. Ten years later, the state intervened to prevent integration at Roanoke's Victory Stadium. Litton, though, forged ahead and Lanesky wrote that “there was tacit acceptance of the integration of our Little League.”

He remembers a bigger commotion over the names of the teams. Four civic groups sponsored four different teams and each one took a sponsor's name — the Lions, the Kiwanis, the Boosters. The problem came with the four sponsor, the Junior Woman's Club. No boys wanted to take the field with “Junior Woman” on the back of their jerseys. The sponsor insisted. Then, as now, money ruled. The club had paid for the jerseys. The boys took the field with “Junior Woman” on their backs.

The season passed uneventfully until it came time for the post-season All-Star competition, the forerunner then as it is now to the Little League World Series. Norton was the only team in the western part of the state whose All-Star team was declared the western champion, which would face the eastern region champions from Charlottesville. Two of the Black players — Johnny Blair and Harold “Mitch” Mitchell — made Norton's All-Star team. Lanesky wrote that “some disgruntled white parents called a meeting to try to remove Johnny and Mitch.” Litton and other Norton Little League organizers held firm. Blair and Mitchell stayed on the team.

This open-mindedness was not unprecedented in this part of the state. Kilgore has called our attention to a 1939 photo that shows an integrated high school football team in Dante, in Russell County. It's easy to forget now but we must remember that, historically, Appalachia was part of the South that was the least interested in the Confederacy, and all that implied. Anyone in Appalachia waving around a Confederate flag today is not celebrating the region's heritage, they are at odds with it. Also, then as now, the eastern part of the state tended to ignore whatever happened in Virginia's westernmost corner.

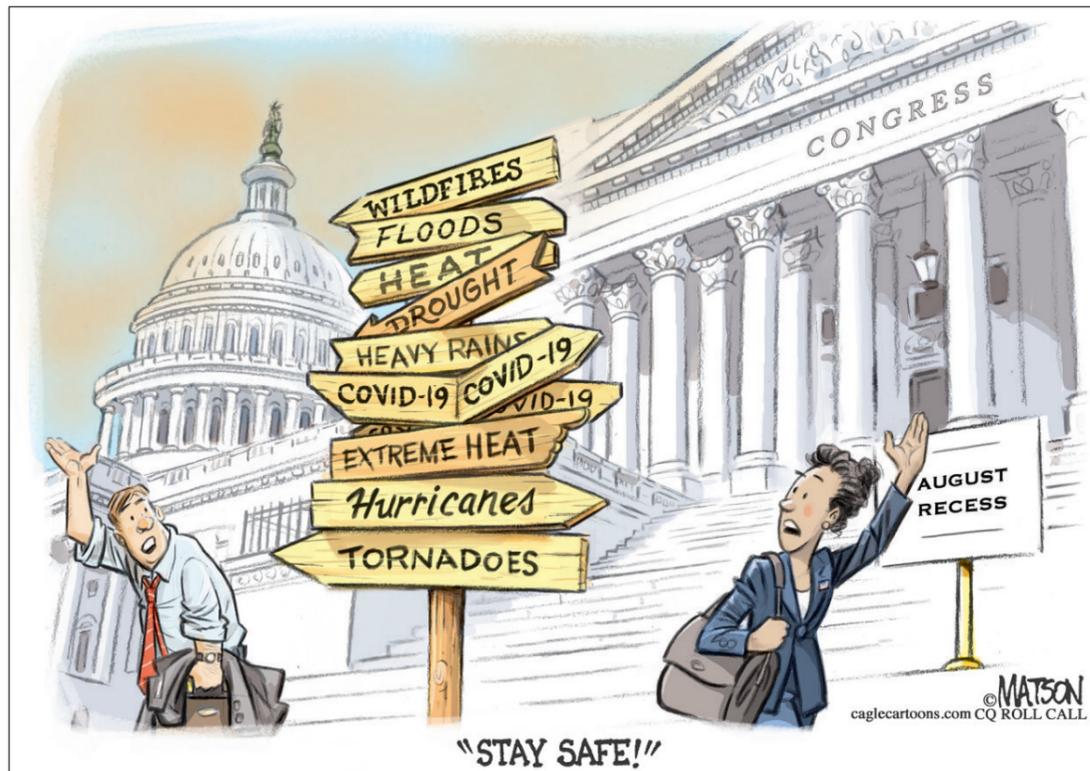
Eventually, though, the Charlottesville Little League organizers learned that Norton's All-Star team was integrated. This would not do. Charlottesville's team told Litton that Norton would have to leave its two Black players behind for the championship game because they were unwelcome on the city's segregated fields. And that's where the real drama began. Norton refused to leave its Black players behind. Lanesky wrote that Charlottesville “faced a choice: either forfeit the championship or play the Norton All-Stars . . . in Norton.” Charlottesville decided to travel to Norton.

“The proud town rolled out a red carpet,” Lanesky wrote. There was a picnic, free ice cream sodas and movie passes. “At 1 p.m. on a clear summer afternoon, the Norton High School band led a parade, the ballplayers riding in convertibles to the Norton Municipal Stadium.” Nearly 1,500 fans squeezed in. In Hollywood fashion, the integrated Norton team thrashed the segregated visitors from Charlottesville, 12-3. Lt. Gov. Lewis Preston “Pat” Collins — considered a protégé of U.S. Sen. Harry Byrd Sr. who in the coming years would advocate “Massive Resistance” to integration — was on hand to present the team with a trophy.

The Norton All-Stars then advanced to the regional Little League tournament in Fairmont, West Virginia. To get to the game, the team flew — the first time many of the kids had ever been on an airplane. Fairmont apparently had no reservations about playing an integrated team. Fairmont also won, 9-0. The Norton All-Stars went home and the Fairmont team eventually advanced to the Little League World Series, where it finished third.

Somehow a 1955 game in Florida between an all-white team from Orlando and an all-Black team from Pensacola has been recorded as the first integrated Little League game in the South. It's just not so. We don't mean to minimize the importance of that game, which was dramatic and important in its own way; 61 white Florida teams refused to play the Black team. That's how Pensacola qualified for the state championship; all its regional competitors had forfeited rather than play. It's also how Orlando wound up as the opponent; nobody else was willing to play. That game for the Florida championship (which Orlando won) does qualify as historic in at least one way — it's said to be the first time in the South that a white team and a Black team played each other for a state championship. But Norton deserves its due for being first to integrate its Little League teams. Where is its historical marker?

CONGRESS GOES ON AUGUST RECESS



“CONGRESS GOES ON AUGUST RECESS” BY R.J. MATSON/CQ ROLL CALL

Your View

Va.'s leaders must reject the PRO Act to protect flexibility for independent workers

U.S. Sen. Mark Warner has stood firm with Virginia's independent workers by not adding his name to the PRO Act. As an independent worker, I thank him and urge him to continue to stand strong.

I started driving with Uber and Lyft as a way to reclaim my schedule as I near retirement, but I have relied on independent work throughout my life. Between cleaning houses and starting my own embroidery business, I have long cherished the flexibility of being my own boss. Unlike working a taxing 9-to-5 job, driving with Uber and Lyft has given me the flexibility to work while also making time for the important things in my life, like my family and my health.

However, the Senate is considering the PRO Act, which defines who can be an independent worker and who is a full-time employee. If the bill passes, I fear that many app-based workers like myself would have the flexibility we rely on

Giving your view

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taken away.

Drivers like myself depend on flexibility, and if that is done away with, I couldn't keep working with Uber and Lyft. That's why Sen. Mark Warner and our other leaders in Congress must reject the PRO Act.

Carolyn Dove
Pulaski, Virginia

Thank you, Jamie Dickeson Swift; let's hope neighbors, leaders heed your messages

Thank you, Jamie Dickeson Swift. Thanks to you, social media is serving a good purpose. For the last year, I have been reading your calls to action, your clear analysis of the threat posed to public health by the novel coronavirus, and your nuanced appeals to people who value freedom and faith.

You are truly a voice crying out in the wilderness. Thank you for using your public and personal platforms to raise awareness, explain science and dispel misinformation.

One can only hope your advocacy as a public health leader will be heeded by the boards of education in Sullivan County, Kingsport and Bristol; by Sullivan County Mayor Venable; and by our state legislators like Sen. Jon Lundberg, and Rep. John Crawford; and by our faith leaders and neighbors.

You have done your part. Let those of us who have ears, hear.
Katy Stigers
Bristol, Tennessee

Addressing crime should not mean ignoring victims' needs for more police

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH EDITORIAL BOARD

St. Louis Post-Dispatch via TNS

Misguided calls from the left to “defund” the police threaten to put Democrats in the position of the Nixon era, when they were successfully painted as soft on crime. The party should respond with a national crime bill that lays out in detail a pragmatic approach that is both forward-looking in addressing the root causes of crime but also aggressively protects victims in the here-and-now.

Crime rates in general haven't risen markedly, but homicide rates across America have skyrocketed. The pandemic is almost certainly a factor. With most of the country sheltered-in for most of last year, all forms of domestic strife certainly have risen. The economic disruption could be a factor. Reduced policing in the wake of last year's protests of police brutality might have played a role. And the ever-loosening restrictions on firearms in places like Missouri certainly haven't helped.

The criminal justice reform movement ascendant on the left

is right about a lot: It's right to view crime as a societal ill with societal causes, most prominently, poverty. It's no coincidence — now in America, or throughout the history of civilization everywhere — that violent crime is worst in areas where poverty is most acute, regardless of the skin color of those living in poverty.

Those advocates are right that systemic racism in police culture is part of the problem, breeding distrust in Black communities that makes community-based crime-fighting more difficult. They're right that offering educational and employment opportunities to young people in troubled areas would yield far better results against crime in the long run than merely the threat of imprisonment.

That said, the scourge of violence against innocent citizens today isn't some right-wing bogeyman. It's real, as residents in the most crime-ridden areas of St. Louis can attest. Progressives who want to shrug off the terrors that these victims face as some temporary problem that social programs will eventually alleviate

should remember that these are families trying to raise their kids in peace right now — and that most of these victims are low-income and Black.

A rational approach to crime shouldn't spend less money addressing it; it should spend more: Yes, more on social and jobs programs, education and outreach, counseling for at-risk youth and violence interrupters. But also more on policing, on modern training techniques, body cameras and other technology — and on additional warm bodies patrolling the streets, which has consistently been shown to be the single most effective way to prevent crime in the moment.

Nixon's success at demonizing Democrats on crime didn't lead to safer streets. Now, as then, Republicans aren't coming to the table with real ideas on crime, just tired old tough talk. Democrats can and should offer more — and they shouldn't let their party be defined by those on the far left whose approach, however well-intentioned, would most victimize those they claim to care most about.