



A STRANGER IN THE KINGDOM (1998) **The Irasburg Affair – Forty Years Later**

Essays by Jay Craven

This summer marks the 40th anniversary of the Irasburg Affair, the notorious 1968 incident where a black minister, Reverend David Johnson, moved from California to the Northeast Kingdom and, within a week, found himself dodging gunshots in his living room. After the drive-by shootings were reported to police, an overzealous Orleans County Prosecutor and state troopers focused their investigation on the minister rather than the shooters. One result was a cover story in Life Magazine, signaling that racial prejudice still lurked in the rolling hills of Vermont.

The Irasburg shooting took place against backdrop of other kinds of racial backlash during the spring of 1968, just weeks after the assassination of Martin Luther King. Although it was planned before King's shooting, Vermont Democratic Governor Phil Hoff and Republican New York City Mayor John Lindsay launched their Vermont—New York project during the spring of 1968, bringing an influx of black teenagers to spend time with teens from the Green Mountain State. Heated letters appeared in every daily newspaper in the state, protesting the presence of the black youngsters and expressing fears that the teens would carry urban ills like crime and violence with them. A prominent Northeast Kingdom legislator showed his opposition by warning Governor Hoff to stay away from the Kingdom unless he was accompanied by a beefed up security detachment.

The Irasburg Affair inspired Howard Frank Mosher's novel, "A Stranger in the Kingdom," which I filmed in 1996. While touring the film throughout the state, audiences were good but I was sometimes criticized for "telling that story" of racial conflict. But I also heard related tales, of how Vermont's French-Canadian families were attacked by a revived Ku Klux Klan during the 1930's and 40's. Another woman wrote to tell me how she had been on the beach at Crystal Lake, right before the Irasburg shooting incident, and saw how the Johnsons were taunted there.

This young Northeast Kingdom woman was just 16 at the time and she became friends with the Johnsons 18 year-old daughter, Brenda. As a result, she and her family were also threatened and subjected to late night calls warning them that they would be "next." She also shared a startling story about how she, Brenda Johnson, and a friend "went up to the common in Irasburg one night just to talk like girls do and something happened so shocking I will never forget it."

"Out from behind the Masonic hall came KKK in full dress robes. I knew who most of them were because of their voices which I recognized as townspeople. We were so scared we remained quiet and sat out of the way. We sat for one-and-a-half hours so no one would think we were there. It has been almost 40 years and I remember things like it was yesterday."

Governor Hoff and Republican Attorney General James Oakes both backed the Johnsons. Oakes and his wife even helped them with family chores. Both politicians were defeated in the fall '68 election—and many observers cite their support for the Johnsons as key factors. A number of other Vermonters, among them the poet Adrienne Rich, also went to Irasburg to stand vigil on the black family's porch.



Several recent developments suggest that Vermont still has some distance to travel on issues of racial justice. I received an e-mail recently from Charles Johnson, Safe Schools Coordinator for the Vermont Department of Education. Johnson wrote to tell me of an alarming series of incidents at the Brattleboro High School, triggered by a group of as many as 40 teens calling themselves the “Nigger Hanging Redneck Association” (NHRA).

The Brattleboro Commons newspaper reported that the core group includes seven or eight students who have been threatening violence against kids of color—and posting “NRHA” on notebooks, Myspace and Facebook pages, sneakers, and a student’s knuckles. Further incidents include a 17 year-old NHRA boy from Guilford who is named in court documents for having threatened a group of kids with a gun.

Also, “A bicyclist discovered plywood signs spray-painted with racial epithets near nine plastic milk jugs filled with urine on a remote dirt road in Vernon,” according to the Commons. “One mother reported that her young son was threatened in a restaurant by members of the NHRA in her presence.”

“This group is targeting middle-school age kids and smaller,” she said.

According to the “Vermont Commons,” Curtiss Reed Jr., executive director of the ALANA Community Organization, said that the NHRA has, “Put the word out twice,” charging students of color to meet at specified places and times to fight.”

The Vermont Advisory Board to the United States Civil Rights Commission held hearings this summer. The board chair noted that “racial profiling remains a persistent problem not only in Vermont but around the country and has negative consequences for both the police and the community.”

Ten years ago, the U.S. Civil Rights Commission issued its findings on Vermont schools, reporting incidents of racial harassment as regular occurrences at nearly every Vermont school that enrolls children of color. Indeed, I am aware of several recent incidents at local schools. And while I toured “A Stranger in the Kingdom” during 1997 and 1998, I counted sixteen racial incidents that occurred across the state, starting with a Burlington event just two miles from our premiere—where a 17 year-old white boy beat a 12 year-old black boy with a baseball bat, sending him to the hospital with a serious concussion.

This week, I showed “A Stranger in the Kingdom” on Nantucket. Afterwards, a man in the audience spoke up. “Jeez, I just thought that kind of stuff only happened in Mississippi and Alabama,” he said.

Then a young woman rose to her feet. “Where do you live?” she asked.

“Boston,” said the man,

The woman laughed. “Boston? And you don’t think Boston has racial problems?” she said.



“Remember the violence over school bussing? And that’s just for starters. Maybe we should thank Vermont for at least bringing their struggles out into the open,” she said. “Because racism remains everywhere. And it will continue to until we talk about it in the open—and don’t continue to hide and pretend it only exists somewhere else.”

Shortly before school let out for summer, Brattleboro High School Principal, James Daly addressed his student body about the NHRA threats:

“On August 28, 1963, an American said, “I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation there they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” That man was Martin Luther King.”

“It is now 40 years after his death and we still have not reached the point where we can all judge another person by the content of his or her character. I guess I knew that, but I always believe that this school’s culture is more sensitive and appreciative than that of the society as a whole.”

“Are some of the so-called members of the NHRA regretting that they let themselves get involved with this? Yes, and putting all of these people down should not make the rest of us feel better. Did some NOT know the impact of putting this symbol next to their names? Probably. Students are young and are entitled to make mistakes. Some students are trying to distance themselves from this abbreviation even as I speak. Some do it out of their concern for what it meant and not out of fear of getting caught. We cannot judge everyone the same way. We can’t paint everyone with the same brush without making the same mistake others have just made. Why don’t we just look for “the content of people’s character?”

King’s Legacy—The Practice of Democracy

By Jay Craven

Martin Luther King’s legacy embodies the creative use of non-violence, the embrace of shared responsibility, a call for leadership in small places, and the practice of democracy. As we approach King’s birthday, I’m reminded of Vermonters who have risen to these challenges.

Ten years ago, I made a film, “A Stranger in the Kingdom,” that tells a story inspired by real-life racial incidents referred to as The Irasburg Affair. My research into the history of those July 1968 events showed me how twin currents of progress and reaction run throughout Vermont’s history.

The Irasburg incidents began with a drive-by shooting at the home of David Lee Johnson, a newly arrived black minister – and the subsequent police investigation that focused more on the background of the minister than the shooters.

Democrat Phil Hoff was the state’s Governor at the time and he acted instinctively to support the Johnsons. Republican Attorney General James Oakes and his wife traveled to Irasburg to help the family with household chores and bear witness, hoping to discourage further violence. A handful of Vermonters, among them poet Adrienne Rich, also went to Irasburg, to stand vigil on the black family’s porch.



The Irasburg incidents were probably inevitable. An unsettled racial climate erupted that spring when Governor Hoff joined with New York Mayor John Lindsay to launch the New York-Vermont Youth Project that hosted several hundred black teenagers here and worked to build bridges of understanding between them and their Vermont peers.

Racially-charged letters poured into newspapers and Governor Hoff's office, denouncing the Youth Project. Vermonters' attitudes, measured in polls, showed a sudden decline in support for civil rights.

Some of the black kids were harassed at Crystal Lake, just days before the shooting. After Hoff's defense of the Johnsons, an angry Northeast Kingdom legislator warned the Governor not to travel to the Kingdom without beefed-up police protection.

Analysts agree that racial backlash hastened the decline in the political careers of both Hoff and Oakes. But both of these men, along with the ordinary Vermonters who traveled to Irasburg, embodied the mandates of the King legacy—just three months after his death. They faced up to shared civic responsibility, they showed courage and leadership even when it was dangerous and unpopular, and they practiced non-violent direct action as an essential democratic tool and a deterrent to violence.

Vermont was the first state to abolish slavery and legalize civil unions, among others. We also continue to face challenges on the issues of racial equality. Reports from the U.S Civil Rights Commission found harassment is all too common in Vermont schools that include children of color.

Biographer Taylor Branch says that at the end of his life, Martin Luther King openly questioned whether his commitment to creative non-violence would endure. In a New York Times article last January, Branch issued a call for renewal. "Gunfire took Dr. King's life," he said, "but we determine his legacy. This holiday, let that inspiration remain our patriotic challenge."