

King

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of 1968.

And it all started in Williams Bay.

Participants describe the retreat at Conference Point as a catalyst that united King's southern-based organization with new northern civil rights leaders, including a young Jesse Jackson.

"It was kind of a magical moment," participant Mary Lou Finley said. "It was an exciting moment, because it was launching this movement."

For all the impact it had in Chicago, the gathering at Conference Point went largely unnoticed in the Lake Geneva area. It made the front page of the Lake Geneva Regional News, but it was quickly forgotten.

Longtime residents and history buffs in Williams Bay today are unaware that their community played a role in the civil rights movement of the '60s.

Laurie Meiser, a former board member of the Lake Geneva Youth Camp, which acquired Conference Point about 10 years ago, notes that with King's visit occurring in October, it took place after the summer tourist season had ended. That means many seasonal residents would have already cleared out.

Not only that, Conference Point was even more remote and isolated 50 years ago than it is today, so Meisner suspects that many area residents simply never knew that some of King's prominence had come and gone.

The property's current ownership group has few, if any, records of the 1965 event. Only information passed down from previous owners keeps the King event in the institutional memory.

Those associated with Conference Point, however, take pride in knowing that

King and some of his associates spent time there, Meisner said.

"It's just pretty cool when you think of them being on the property," she said.

Among others believed to have participated in the gathering were Andrew Young, who later became mayor of Atlanta and U.S. ambassador to the United Nations; James Bevel, who had joined King months earlier in the "Bloody Sunday" march in Selma, Alabama; and Al Raby, who became an influential political figure in Chicago and today has a high school named after him.

The Regional News at the time reported that 200 people participated in the retreat, which took place from Oct. 8 to Oct. 10, 1965. King addressed the crowd on Oct. 9, and was quoted in the newspaper as saying that the Chicago movement would be "a pilot project" for civil rights efforts in other northern cities.

According to some participants, the racial makeup of those in attendance was approximately half black and half white.

Because King had become a controversial figure in America, the gathering was not without its tense moments.

Candace Hamley, whose father worked as caretaker at Conference Point, said cars were used to block entrances as a security measure to keep away unwanted intruders. Her recollection is that there were no intruders or other problems.

Although it was unusual to have a national celebrity visit, Hamley, a young child at the time, was unaware until years later of the significance of King's retreat.

"I wish I was older," she said. "I wish I had known."

Her father, Palmer DeLap, worked at Conference Point for more than 40 years, until the 1980s.

David Jehnsen, who par-

ticipated in the 1965 conference as another church representative from Chicago, said participants slept in the overnight accommodations provided at Conference Point. On a few occasions when they ventured off site for supplies, Jehnsen recalls encountering local residents who seemed unimpressed with the strange out-of-town visitors.

"There wasn't the warmest reception when people figured out who we were," he said. "You could feel there was some tension."

Hamley speculated that organizers in Williams Bay intentionally kept the gathering as secret as possible to prevent any possible disturbance.

Finley, who attended as Bevel's administrative assistant, said she and others had been living for months in rundown apartments buildings in Chicago, as they slowly gathered and organized. Getting away for a weekend on the lakefront at Conference Point, Finley said, was a welcome change of scenery.

"I remember it being very nice and beautiful and refreshing," she said. "It was a real relief."

Scant mention is made of the weekend retreat in historical accounts of Martin Luther King Jr.'s work.

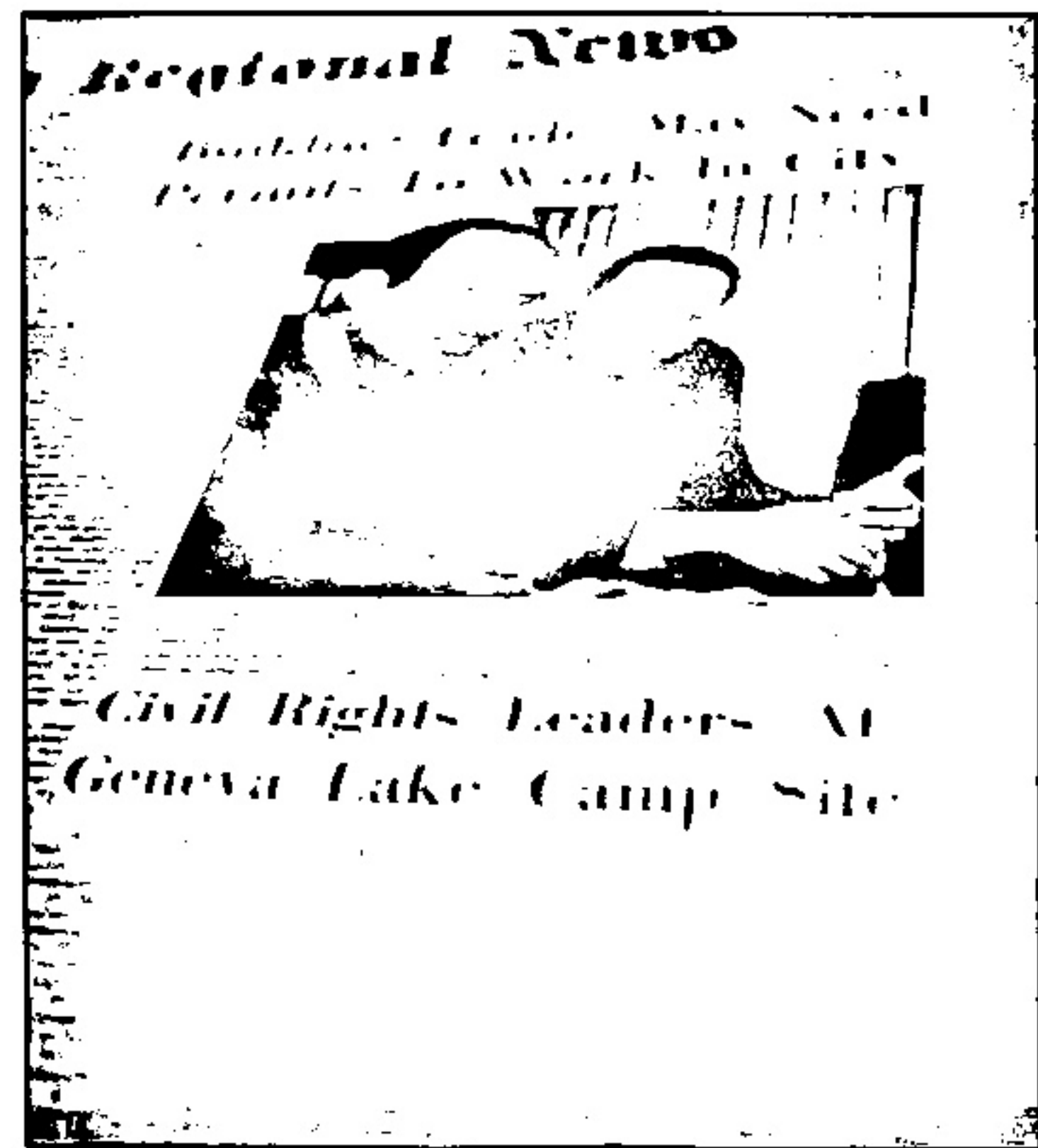
In a 1993 book called "Northern Protest," author James R. Ralph Jr. described an event "outside Lake Geneva in Wisconsin," stating that the gathering included workshops, singing and speeches. In his speech at Conference Point, King said that blacks and whites must come together to succeed in Chicago, according to the book.

Ralph quoted the civil rights leaders as telling the crowd, "If we can break the system in Chicago, it can be broken any place in the country."

The Regional News account included a similar quote, "If we can break the



A large octagon-shaped chapel, above, still stands at Conference Point Center in Williams Bay and, because of its size, is likely where Martin Luther King Jr. addressed a civil rights gathering in October 1965; and the front page of the Lake Geneva Regional News on Oct. 14, 1965, includes a report on Martin Luther King Jr.'s three-day visit to a "Geneva Lake camp site." (Photos by Scott Williams/Regional News).



backbone of discrimination in Chicago, we can do it in all of the cities of this country."

Nine months later, on July 10, 1966, King officially began the Chicago Freedom Movement with a rally attended by 30,000 people at Chicago's Soldier Field.

Less than two years after that, King was assassinated by a gunman in Memphis, Tennessee, at the age of 39.

Those who gathered with him in 1965 at Conference Point are now mostly in their 70s and 80s. In some cases, their memories of the history-making weekend in Wisconsin have grown foggy.

But they do remember their brief time together in Williams Bay, and they hope that the occasion is not forgotten in Williams Bay, either.

Jimmy Collier, a musician who provided most of the musical accompaniment at Conference Point and other civil rights events, said residents of the Lake Geneva region should appreciate that their community played a role in a pivotal moment in Martin Luther King Jr.'s movement.

"The people in Lake Geneva," Collier said, "should be very proud."