

“THERE’S ONE SMART N.....,”

Come on down . . . forget your care
Co . . . me on down, you’ll see me there
So long town . . . I’m heading for
Tuxedo Junction . . . Now

Tuxedo Junction—a jazz song—was popularized by Erskine Hawkins in the roaring twenties. Erskine made the Negro night club circuit as pianist, composer and jazz singer and his trademark was Tuxedo Junction. An historical marker has been erected where once a night club marked this corner—Tuxedo Junction. Part of Ensley—a ghetto of blacks in Birmingham, Alabama—this is where the colored (as they were then called) gathered on Saturday night—to forget their cares.

It was at Tuxedo Junction that a Passionist—Father Arnold Vetter—in 1938 started what was to become the Passionist Colored Missions. Located directly opposite the night club hall Father Arnold was in the heart of the ghetto. He bought an unused building for \$1.00. For six years it had been unused—padlocked by the U.S. Federal Internal Office because of bootlegging and the sale of narcotics. Pope Pius XI in 1936 had urged the American Church and specifically religious congregations to become more involved in the colored apostolate in the south. The Catholic Church in the south was hamstrung by lack of resources and to some extent by prejudice to work among the colored. Actually in many states like Alabama Catholics were barely five percent or

under of the total population and in no position to work among the Baptist Blacks.

Father Arnold arrived and with his spartan one dollar acquired this desolate building. Aided by his brother Father Henry Vetter (who was to be killed in a truck accident while working among the poor of Baja in Mexico) they set to work to make the place habitable. (In three years Father Matthew, the twin brother of Henry, was to go with Carl to far-off Japan.)

Ensley was regarded as a foreign mission at that time. And it was foreign—segregation made it a pocket of apartheid far removed from mainstream white America. Fortunately this term “foreign mission” has become obsolete—from the gospel there is to be nothing foreign in the Catholic Church—we are all called to be missionaries.

Soon the building at Tuxedo Junction and the lack of land upon which to expand forced Father Arnold to move a few blocks—from 20th and Ensley Avenue to Avenue T and S on 19th Street. In the following years a church, rectory, convent, grade and high schools and hospital were all to be built. The dream of Pope Pius XI was certainly fulfilled in this particular area—thanks in great part to the fundraising efforts of Father Ludger Martin who tapped the resources of involved northern Catholics.

It was a Saturday afternoon—April 9th, 1950—and a young man, George Welch, was sitting on his porch a block away from the Passionist setting. He saw a handsome priest walking around the block with the black habit of the Passionists. Obviously, he was newly arrived. The next day at Mass Father Carl, the new priest, introduced himself to George—and things were never again the same for either of them. A 37-year friendship developed—only to be ended by an assassin’s bullet.

Father Carl had come to be the assistant of Father Nathanael Kriscunas, the pastor. In the three years that Carl was to

spend in Ensley they were described by observant blacks as comfortable as two peas in corn bread. Nat (as he was called) told Carl at the beginning: Don't worry about money—you work with the people. Years later in the Philippines how Carl must have longed for such a spiritual blessing!!

What was the "foreign" mission like in 1950? It was basically the same as in 1938—a segregated world. This was popularly called a Jim Crow world. On exhibit at the Chicago Historical Museum is minstrel show music—minstrel shows caricatured black dancers and singers. One of them was Jim Crow and his name was adapted after the Civil War to mean the laws and customs that discriminate against blacks. Minstrel shows were a form of popular entertainment, especially in white churches and portrayed the colored as harmless joyful children. The male was called "boy." And this code had passed into written and unwritten laws. The recent stage and cinema production of "Driving Miss Daisy" brings out some of the embarrassing aspects of segregation of this all-pervasive code.

Birmingham was seen by many to be the Bastille of Segregation—ruled over by Bull Connor the police chief. He was to achieve world-wide notoriety a decade later through his use of dogs on black children.

The year before Carl went to Ensley Senator Bilbo of Mississippi proclaimed to the State Legislature: Every red-blooded white man must use every means necessary to keep niggers from the polls.

Segregation was all pervasive in the south. A black woman could not try on a hat in a department store unless she wrapped her head in tissue paper. There was no place to try on clothes for blacks in any department store. The separate but equal laws affected drinking fountains, parks, schools, hospitals, buses, trains, restrooms.

Twelve years after Carl came to Birmingham, Martin Luther King was to write his famous letter from a Birmingham jail:

"Hate-filled police, twenty million blacks smothered in poverty. Amusement parks closed, swimming pools closed to blacks, colored sleeping in cars, because motels were closed to blacks. The daily humiliation of signs proclaiming: White Only. Your first name—nigger, your middle name—boy, your wife and mother—never called Mrs. In sum, a life lived constantly in fear of what to expect next, inner fears and outer resentments—a sense of nobodiness."

Carl fresh from the north found himself in this world. He came from a white culture—fifteen years of seminary training, where to a great extent he was cut off from even whites. Nothing in his formation, training prepared him for this. And yet Carl became one of us—this was the experience of the colored with whom he lived.

Faced with Jim Crow, Carl came to a quick decision. He would test, circumvent, ignore or challenge many of the taboos of the south. And always with the backing of the pastor—Father Nat.

Carl was in Baptist country. Certainly the Church was foreign to many of these Baptists no matter how religious. A hard-core were Catholic—George and his family were outstanding examples. But the ordinary average Ensley person found the beloved Church of Carl very strange. The priest said Mass with his back to the people. Mass was in a strange language—the blessed murmur of the Latin Mass. Incense, candles, sprinkling of holy water—all had overtones of black magic. The bowing, the striking of the breast, the priestly blessings could leave one in awe—maybe even fear. And then the priest would place something white on a tongue—all this could leave an impression of voodoo or magic.

Father Nat gave Carl two responsibilities—to work with black youth—particularly the boys—and to make converts—as it was called in those less ecumenical days. Both involved taboos—Jim Crow laws. Where would you take the blacks to swim? How would a white person enter a black home—

especially public housing? This is where George Welch came in—the young man who had at first eyed Carl with a wary look the day Carl arrived. Carl had to have someone drive him around to visit these homes. Years later George would smile and say: The only time I got any rest was when Carl went on vacation.

George had just returned from Detroit where he had been schooled in electrical engineering. He knew a world other than the confines of Ensley. And above all George saw in Carl a priest of deep piety and steel resolve. As George sums up Carl today thirty-nine years later: He became black in spirit. He identified with our life. He was our brother.

To work with youth. But in those days that usually meant being involved with sports. Another normal contact of young priests was with the altar boys—but since most at Ensley were Baptists, this was out.

So Carl—handsome, of superb physical strength and stamina (somewhat of a Bing Crosby in “Going My Way”) took over the young men—from high school through the early twenties. George was his contact man. The idea was to keep them off the streets. Carl saw immediately the need for a club house. Shot houses—bootleg whiskey at fifty cents a shot abounded in the area—and this was another reason for quick action to get a center.

The Sisters of Charity of Nazareth were building their hospital and teaching at the new Holy Family High School. On the grounds was a house to be torn down. Carl with his winsome smile obtained this home and saw in it his future boys club home. It had to be torn down and moved three blocks. (It still stands, although boarded up.)

Carl in torn T-shirt, covered with grime and soot, sweating profusely in the Birmingham heat was in the midst of this colored wrecking team. He was barely recognizable. Taking charge he gave orders as the obvious leader. A white construction worker on the new hospital site took one look

and remarked with a degree of awe to a fellow-worker: “There’s one smart nigger.”

Carl’s amateur construction group looked up. Carl laughed. He had arrived. He was identified with the colored—as later on with the Japanese and Filipinos. Carl in time was to become a living rainbow coalition. The club flourished—over fifty young men joined it. This was far more than he would ever have at Mass. The shot houses took a dive in popularity. It is interesting that just as Martin Luther King was to stress years later the need for his people to speak good English, so Carl made it a point to do the same.

Summer posed problems—the blazing heat and humidity of Alabama. Pools were closed to the colored. So Carl would take his group to Selma, Cullman (where the Benedictine Abbey offered a lake) and sometimes to far off St. Jude City in Montgomery, founded by ex-Passionist Harold Purcell. Father Mike Caswell, also a former Passionist, welcomed Carl and his group to his parish. It is sad that Father Mike was to be murdered just as Carl was to suffer a similar fate.

Basketball was the main outlet for all the energy Carl found among the young. He was picked to represent Holy Family High School—now seven years old and even then a power in basketball. Carl became an official of the Jefferson County Negro Athletic Association—the only white on the Board. This group handled the Negro high school athletic program and Carl was soon respected as a man of integrity and justice.

One of the black high schools was accused of paying the father of a player—this time in the area of football. Probably peanuts in terms of what has gone on since then. But Carl was a man who believed in laws—for blacks as well as whites. He saw this as a breach of trust and voted sanctions against the high school in question. He thus incurred their undying wrath and never again would this school play Holy Family either in basketball or football. The isolated world of the black ghetto had many irritants. One that ran-

kled Carl was that the blacks played football on Monday night, the whites on Saturday. Unlike Saturday for the whites who could recuperate from the game, the blacks had to show up in class Tuesday. Yet Carl never seemed to harbor resentments or bitterness at this constant second class world in which he voluntarily lived.

Carl was a strict fearless disciplinarian. Even in grade school there were knives. It didn't take Carl long to find out who had them. With the student in tow and Carl carrying the carving delicacy, he would bring them to their parents to handle the situation. Of a more serious nature would be confrontations at parish events—switch blades, shot guns would appear. As one of Carl's boys would say: They came mean as rattlesnakes. Carl would meet them at the door and lay down the law. He was always calm, confident, self-possessed. He knew how to handle raw situations. Little did he dream how he would be faced with far more serious situations in the Philippines while dealing with the NPA (the Communist military).

Carl was very vigilant in terms of the sixth and ninth commandments or in general with the problems of young people growing up. He was very insistent on the classifications of the Legion of Decency. Lorenzo Gortrell—who was another driver for Carl—recalls how he would warn his group "DON'T be a hound dog." Lorenzo says he didn't exactly use that language but that was the general idea. Fathers Nat and Carl would often show movies to the youth, but when any kissing scene came along they would hastily block out the projector. This led to a great groaning and hilarity. Looking around at the nineties maybe it wasn't such a bad idea. Summing it up all Lorenzo says that the constant message of Carl was: Respect girls.

George Welch was invaluable to Carl during these years. Their friendship was cemented from the beginning in what was in reality breaking one of the most rigid taboos of the south.

Carl asked George to take him to the Palace theatre—a movie house a few blocks from Holy Family. George—recently returned from Detroit where he had seen more freedom for blacks—agreed. In approaching the ticket window Carl was told in no uncertain terms that NO WHITES were allowed. Carl called for the manager. He explained the situation and his steely resolve won the manager's grudging permission. Once inside Carl sat in the back row with George—only to be the center of attention. The word spread like wildfire and dozens got out of their seats to look at Carl and his shining Roman collar. Carl sat there comfortably waiting for the movie to start thus making a slight crack in the wall of segregation.

But Carl's courage just went so far. On the way home he swore George to secrecy—don't tell Father Martin Ludger of this breaking of the Jim Crow laws.

Another time with George driving they were hit broadside by a car which went through a red light. The police gave tickets to the white driver and also to George. They appeared in court, but Carl could not conceive that George would be found at fault. He was and faced jail. Carl hastily tore up to Holy Family to get fine money from Father Ludger. It seems that Father Ludger knew far more about Carl and his activities than Carl gave him credit for. In the south nothing was more a taboo than for whites and blacks to be in a car, especially male/female (with the exception of Driving Miss Daisy). Often Carl would have black men and women with him particularly when he was involved in going to homes for convert instructions. Once Carl was at the wheel—two men, two women in the car. Suddenly the police pulled them over. Carl calmly got out and in his clerical attire calmly asked what was wrong. The police—all of whom were in the KKK in those days—quickly backtracked and just said they were checking the lights. Actually Carl was soon on a first name basis with the police in Ensley—Car 22, Car 41—and the consensus soon was reached: Leave those priests alone.

Carl's real apostolate was making converts—as it was called in those pre-ecumenical days. As a white man it was frowned on to go to homes where blacks lived. This is where men like George and Lorenzo came in. They started what was called the Car-Lites—bringing Carl to these homes sometimes miles from Ensley. They were often stopped by the police when out of Ensley. Lorenzo sums it up by saying that they were prowling for Christ.

They would go to public housing. These were called Bricktowns—two-story buildings made of brick. The main room would be ten by ten. In private homes—which sometimes were more like shacks—the room would be even smaller. Here they would gather—jammed in—five, ten listening to Carl explaining the teachings of the Catholic church to Baptists. Carl was utterly opposed to making quick converts. His emphasis was on the family—life morality.

One convert still living—Jay Herbert, eighty years of age—recalls how Carl wanted him to understand the Church—its sacraments and practices. He still remembers vividly how Carl explained why Catholics use Holy Water, why Catholics make the Stations of the Cross. Jay says: Every word out of his mouth was real. At Mass he would draw you to him, to Jesus.

Carl's work among converts is seen today—Catholics to the third and fourth generation.

The heart of Carl's priesthood was the Eucharist. He loved to celebrate Mass, to preach. He saw in the Eucharist the great sign of unity—where there is neither Greek nor Jew, black or white.

Once this was severely tested by Carl. Annually the Catholics of Birmingham have a Corpus Christi gathering in the football stadium (where Carl was faithful on Monday nights). Deliberately Carl brought his people early and sat them in the prominent center of the stadium. Soon consternation broke out and the Knights of Columbus quietly

came to usher Carl and his flock to the upper regions. In those days there was a name for such seating. Carl was adamant and in no mood to turn his flock into black sheep. He held his ground. As a result there was a completely different mosaic at that Corpus Christi gathering.

For years the Felician Sisters from the Chicago Province staffed the grade school. Carl is fondly remembered by many of these Felician Sisters, who like him, had been raised in the ethnic parishes of Chicago.

Sister Helen Marie Ulaseck writes: Carl was very outgoing, personable, unassuming. When he taught religion he was excellent.

Sister Mary Josephine Janicki saw him as a priest who involved the school children in what we now call evangelization. The school children called it being where the action is.

She says: Father Carl was very cooperative and worked hard to get families back to the church—not only to church, but to confession. Once he came to my class and asked the kindergarteners to pray for a lady who wanted to become a Catholic, but couldn't because of the problem, difficulty of confession. She could accept all about the Catholic church, except that. We prayed every day for six weeks. Then one day Father Carl came and told us to pray for six weeks, thanking God for the great grace He gave to that lady.

Father Carl had many converts but he went out of his way to help lukewarm Catholics. He was always coming to my classroom to ask us to pray for him—we did, because we knew it was for something very important that Carl was doing for God.

Sister Mary Adelma Stojek says Carl always wanted to be a missionary. "He had not given up his dream that motivated him in student life, the abortive dream of China. It seemed his heart was there. He made a thirty-day retreat at Holy Family and we the Sisters would see him outside

walking back and forth praying and meditating on his future. I remember we had a farewell party for him before he left for Japan. The people at Holy Family were poor, so we wrote our families for donations to give him as a gift. He was very grateful—I mean—REALLY GRATEFUL."

Sister Thomas Marie Czyzewski, CSSF, wrote of the help Father Carl offered her and the other Sisters in Ensley: "Let me relate a personal experience of his direct influence on me. I found it very hard, especially at the beginning, to deal with Black students, my first experience with another culture. Father Carl seemed to sense that. Several times he spoke to me on learning to understand and follow that with acceptance. One particular time, on the playground, the struggle of coping with the situation forced tears. He noticed, and his compassionate instruction encouraged me and gave me not only the inner comfort I needed at that time, but also the strength to go on to make a 'go of it' for as long as I was to be at Holy Family.

"Father Carl liked fun too; he enjoyed making others happy. He realized the tensions, hardships and struggles that teachers and catechists had there at that time, so he planned recreational and inspirational trips. His invitation to the three Religious Communities of Sisters working there: Sisters of Charity, Franciscans, and Felician Sisters, brought into life an unequaled family spirit among them. Each of these experiences refreshed us through relaxation and spiritual enlightenment and peace. We became a unified and happy group.

"Father Carl TOUCHES souls. He was an instrument God used to TOUCH people. He seemed to BREATHE Christ. Wherever he was, he made Christ PRESENT."

One afternoon in January of 1953, Carl went up to his room in the rectory. A letter was sitting on his small desk. Never suspecting anything he opened it—only to sit down fast. He was being sent to Japan.

Carl had fallen in love with Ensley. And yet the pull of the Orient had always been there ever since his abortive trip to China.

His leave taking was simple. That is what he wanted. Father Ludger in his Mission Broadcast (his fund raising publication) simply stated that Father Carl saw the will of God in his new appointment.

It was not that simple. For almost forty years Carl would return when he was on furlough. He always said: This is coming home.

George and his wife, Marylne, would remain close to him all these years. In fact he taught Marylne to grow flowers after he had seen the beauty of flowers in Japan. She says now: He taught me so well now I can grow trees.

Others—Lorenzo, Jay, Hilda, Gloria, Lulu, Lillian, Henry—still live rooted in memories of Carl. Many of them were passengers with Carl and his Car-Lites pilgrimages.

On Easter Sunday 1988 these loved parishioners were stunned to know that their beloved Father Nathanael had died in Louisville. Scarcely returned from his funeral they were devastated to know that Carl had been shot fatally the Thursday after Easter. Nat and Carl—as comfortable as two peas in corn bread—were now united forever.

The raucous seductive beat of Tuxedo Junction is long gone. What Father Arnold did—with dozens of other Passionists and with the aid of the Felician Sisters and the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth—has left an indelible sound in the heart of Ensley and far beyond.

Carl came in 1950 to the sound of a different drummer.

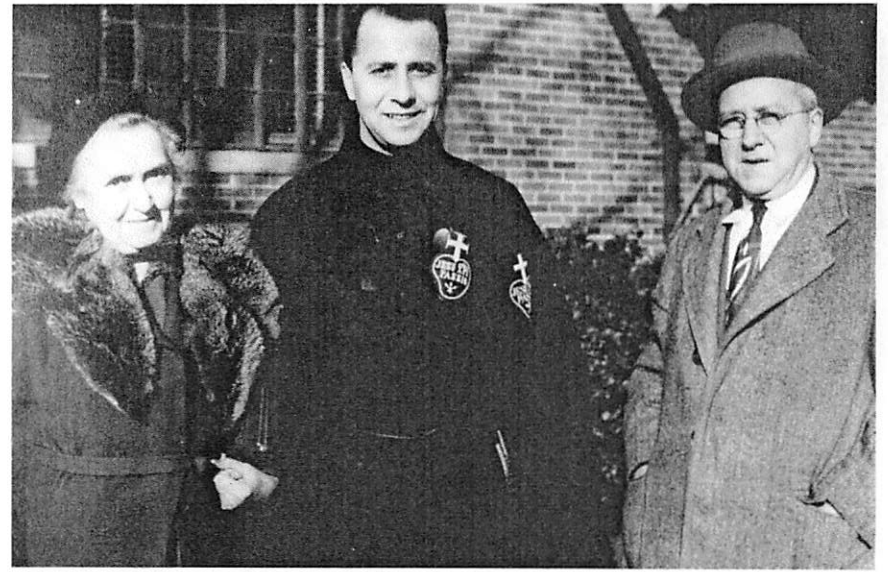
The skin-deep remark "there is one smart nigger" was a great compliment to Carl who identified with Tuxedo Junction—took it for what it was and sunk his roots in that struggling slum.

Come on down—forget your care
 Come on down—you'll see me there . . .

They saw Carl there for three years. They forgot something of their care with the presence of Carl. He loved Ensley. Thirty, forty years later they still had care as all do. But they never forgot Carl as he left them for Japan and eventually for the Philippines.

They saw him there—in life and then in death.

The brutal, inhuman, caption for this chapter speaks eloquently of the dark world of racism that Carl did so much to challenge and to lessen. Carl would have rejoiced in the descriptive "Afro-American" accorded to his people today. Not laws, but women and men, like Carl and George, have transformed the Tuxedo Junctions of our nation.



Mom and Dad visiting with Father Carl in Ensley in 1952.



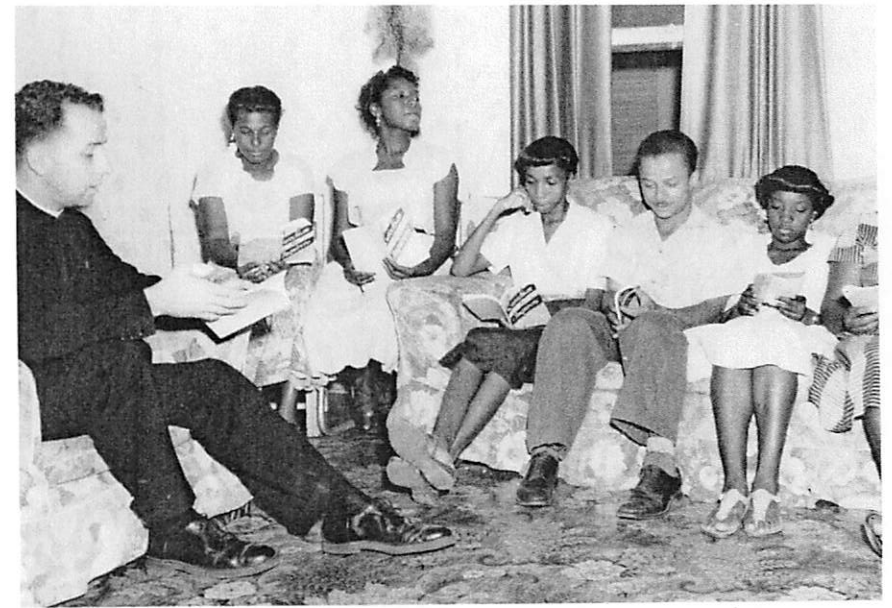
Father Carl with Marian, and their older sister, Lucille.



Father Carl's mother, Mame, visiting in Ensley — winter of 1952.



Father Carl joins Marian and John in their 45th wedding anniversary with their family.



Father Carl giving instructions in an Ensley home, 1951.



Marian Schmitz Crimmings and Father Carl at a 1986 reception at St. Celestine's Parish, Elmwood Park, Illinois.



Father Carl visiting his Ensley friend, George Welch.



Father Carl visiting his eighty-year old convert and friend, Jay Herbert in Ensley.



Farewell party by the Ensley children in January 1953.