# Black Activism in Lake Worth in the Civil Rights Era: Robert Mitchell and the Afro-American Civic Action Unit

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## **Background**

Between 1966 and 1970 -- four critical years in the history of civil rights, the Afro-American Civic Action Unit (AACAU) and its key spokesman, Robert L. Mitchell, appears as the principle and most visible advocate for community facilities, services, and improvements in the segregated Osborne "Colored Addition" neighborhood in Lake Worth. Mitchell first surfaces in the newspapers leading protest marches from Osborne to Lake Worth City Hall. During this period, he appeared before the Lake Worth City Commission (and other special meetings) more than 20 times —often with Osborne community supporters. In a local political and cultural climate slow to respond to demands for equal treatment and services for the black community -- and during a period when there were also instances of racial violence in Palm Beach County -- Mitchell apparently played a unique role as an effective community activist — in a period where overt protest from local black residents might provoke retaliation in terms of city employment.

By and large, Mitchell's activism was not focused on symbolic protest, passive "disobedience", or disruption. Rather, as related below, Mitchell's appearances in Lake Worth appeared consistently provoked significant responses in terms of City actions. In contrast to much of the contemporary civil rights struggle (in Florida and elsewhere), his efforts were targeted on specific positive changes in the provision of public facilities and services in Lake Worth's underserved black Osborne neighborhood. His emphasis on resources -- rather than segregation - puts him somewhat at odds with the mainstream civil rights organizations who were substantially focused on integration of school and other public services thru demonstrations and lawsuits (such as the drawn-out struggle for school integration in PBC).

#### The Afro-American Civic Action Unit

While Mitchell always identified himself as representing the AACAU –sometimes as "Executive Director", he was vague – if not cagey - regarding how many belonged to the AACAU. Newspaper stories suggest he was substantially a "one-man band" except when he gathered supporters for specific issue in a specific location. Associates of Mitchell recall that when asked how many members of the community he represented, he always cagily replied" those that ask don't know, and those that know are not saying".

(That there may have been some organization is suggested by a 1968 *Palm Beach Post* article citing Robert T Littles as chairman of the AACAU "Education Committee". Littles had a subsequent political career of his own in Palm Beach County]. This lack of an organization notwithstanding, his activities in Lake Worth were reported on the front pages of the *Lake Worth Herald* and the *Palm Beach Post* more than 30 times in four years— not including his activities in other PBC communities or at the County level.

While he was relentless in his appearances and consistent in his demands over this three-year period, he was nonconfrontational – and unlike much of the current civil rights activity, did not focus on social issues such as integration. All his activities -- including his individual advocacy appearances and the

marches and group attendances that he organized under the banner of the AACAU-- were peaceful and orderly. While he often appeared uninvited at civic government meetings to make his points, he also sought to be included in regular order agendas and sought special meetings and workshops to pursue his objective.

A native and resident of West Palm Beach, Mitchell had achieved notoriety as a West Palm Beach Roosevelt High School baseball player and subsequent Negro League star. He appears on the political scene in 1966, when he was 34. During the period of his involvement in Lake Worth, Mitchell had also appeared before several other Palm Beach city and County commissions and boards – alone and with supporters representing broader county-wide involvement.

Mitchell vehemently opposed the use of the word "Negro", self-identified with Stokely Carmichael who was at that time president of SNCC, and -- like Carmichael -- later supported voter registration and political organization. In 1968 he was quoted as saying "Blacks must unite – what's more they must separate. It is not surprising, therefore that, in 1969, after four years as a community activist, Mitchell – absent his characteristic afro hairdo and sunglasses -- moved into County and State electoral politics, including voter registration, and focused on organizing a "crossover vote" focused to move black voters from their traditional affiliation with the governing (and welfare-providing) Democratic Party to the Republican Party. He moved to Riviera Beach, became an official in state Republican politics in the mid-1970s –eventually disappearing from local newspapers after 1975.

At the time of this note, most of his adult contemporaries in Osborne have passed off the scene and there is no community memory, so this important piece of Lake Worth history is reconstructed from newspaper articles.

## Seeking "Equality Not Integration" Marchers Say

This was the page 1 headline of the July 7, 1966, the *Herald*, reporting that Mitchell led a group of Osborne residents carry placards in a March surrounding Lake Worth city calling for "Equality not Integration". According to the *Herald*, this was the second march of silent demonstrators in five days along the same route up and down Dixie Highway.

Mitchell and his fellow marchers entered the Commission Chamber, and, at the end of the meeting, Mitchell asked why letter he had sent to the Commission requesting meeting had not been acted upon. Commission agreed to follow up conference and Mitchell is demonstrators left.

Mitchell had had a previous career before entering civil rights in Palm Beach County. Born in 1932 in West Palm beach, he was a pitching star at Roosevelt High School. Graduating in 1951, he was recruited as a pitcher to the West Palm Beach team in the Florida Negro league. After two seasons in a minor-league team, he was recruited to the Kansas City Monarchs then a key team in the Negro American League that had continued to exist after Major League integration in the late 1940s. As "Peach Head Bob" he had a 30-14 record, and rubbed shoulders with several of the great Negro players later in the Majors. He retired in 1957, got married, and went to work for Pratt & Whitney plant in West Palm. According to some, the lunchroom at Pratt & Whitney – a major national corporation -- served as one incubator of black community consciousness in West Palm Beach. In addition to his political activism, Mitchell was also active supporting youth sports in the County. He stayed with Pratt and Whitney until retiring in 1993 and moving to Tampa, where he was involved in securing retirement and health insurance support for former Negro League players. He died on June 12, 2019. Source: <a href="https://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/negro-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-league-lea

Questioned by reporters about "grievances", Mitchell cited general conditions in the Osborne neighborhood which he claimed were far below standards for the rest of the City. As the *Herald* reported: "Asked whether complaints about conditions in an area designated as a Negro section is in keeping with the national effort towards integration, Mitchell stated that none of the groups grievances touch upon the question of integration: "We are seeking to assure living conditions for people that are equal and minimum standards to those in other sections of the city of Lake Worth."

The involvement of Robert L Mitchell appears to have begun several months earlier. A May 28 1966 *Post* article reported that the City had been investigating charges made by Mitchell representing the "Afro-American Civic Action unit" regarding employment discrimination and city departments. Mitchell's letter had charged that:" Negroes are made to do heavy work such as digging ditches while white employees stood by". Mitchell's charges provoked a robust response from Lake Worth city manager Tom G. Smith:

"We were surprised to receive your complaint on racial discrimination in Lake Worth, as we have received no reports of unfair treatment... of any kind .... Original appointments and advancements in city services are based on the merit of the candidates.... All employees are paid identical wages for the same classification.... Racial relations in Lake Worth have been exceptional. Lake Worth was the first high school in the country to be integrated. One of the first-grade schools to be phased out, with Negro students being moved into a former all white school. Athletic activities and other programs have been open to all races. City-owned facilities such as the beach, swimming pool, casino restaurant, fishing pier, snack shop, and golf course have been integrated. To date we have experienced no trouble caused by integrating these public facilities".

While the Herald reported that Mitchell failed to appear at the June City Commission workshop on city budget regarding his assertion that racial bias exists in the city department, the commission agreed to meet with Mitchell. Over the next two years, Mitchell appeared at several commission meetings regarding conditions of employment and equal pay.

A week later after the July 7 march, Mitchell led about 70 "protesting Negroes ranging from small boys to middle-aged men" in another march outside City Hall. Mitchell was identified as being "from West Palm Beach and Executive Director of the AACAU" leading this group of Negroes, most of them from the Osborne quarters ", lined up for the entire block on the sidewalk facing Lucerne Avenue. As the paper reported "There was no excitement or disorder. Shortly after 8 o'clock the group marched down South Dixie to "the quarters", which started 12 Avenue South." Some of the plaques read "City bias hurts Negroes", "we protest alleged discriminatory practice", and "Uhuru now" referring to black protest Swahili word for freedom.

### The Bi-Racial Committee

In August, Lake Worth Mayor Richard Carpenter reported on the formation of the City's first "Bi-Racial Advisory Committee", tentatively approved by Commissioners during an August 4 special meeting with the delegation with the AACAU. The advisory group -- headed by Rev. O. V. Hitchcock, Pastor of the Calvary Methodist Church -- consisting of three white and three negro members is designed to "serve as a sounding board for complaints, and it will be their function to make recommendations to the City Commission for equitable distribution of matters pertaining specifically to Negro members of our

community". According to the August 24 *Post*, at the August 4, meeting Mitchell had told mayor Carpenter his group preferred "a Negro's Negro, not the kind you want".

On 24 August, the *Herald* reported a meeting at which Mitchell objected to the three Negro members of the city had appointed. A letter from Mitchell "speaking on behalf of many Lake Worth Negroes" said that the Afro-American Civic action unit "cannot work" with the bi-racial committee named by the city Commission and objected (without specific reasons) to the Commission's appointees: George Thomas, 1509 S. Railroad Ave; Mrs Lecie Morris, 1518 S. K St; and Wade Hardeman 1612 Douglas Ave. Mitchell urged the city to appoint Mr. Herman Jackson, 619 Washington St; Minister Fred DeVeaux, 1528 Wingfield St; and Mrs. Nancy McGrady, 532 Johnson St.

On September 1, the *Herald* reported that the Florida Council on Human Relations commended the City for their establishment of the Bi-Racial Advisory committee, hoping that other communities in Palm Beach County would follow the examples of Lake Worth. At the same time, the name of the Committee was changed to the Community Relations Committee at the request of O. V. Hitchcock, the (white) pastor of Lake Worth Calvary Methodist Church to reflect what he felt should be a broader agenda.

# "Lake Worth to Answer Demand of Negro Group"

Certainly, there appear to have been some action indicating that Michell's interventions had an impact. During several encounters between Mitchell and the Commission Mitchell present a list of complaints including lack of playground facilities, lighting of the Osborne baseball field, removal of junked cars, unpaved streets, substandard streetlights, lack of working order water fountains, absence of sidewalks.

The August 9 *Post* also referred to one of the demands made by Mitchell at the meeting with the Commissioners regarding the removal of Lake Worth Sanitary Landfill terming it "a health hazard and that he reported to the state health officials". Many –but not all — of these complaints were taken up in subsequent City budget meetings. In February of the following year, the city manager reported that the city was following up regard stadium lighting at the Howard Park baseball field and that the streets were being resurfaced following sewer installations. A junked car removal program was about to start and street lighting for the business area was being considered, but that rezoning was a necessary precondition.

During this period, Mitchell himself was not idle. According to the *Post*, Mitchell set up a "Beautification Cleanup Committee" for the Osborne community and asked for city help especially with abandon automobiles during the cleanup campaign.

The racial disturbances in Riviera Beach in August 1967 may have changed the receptivity in Lake worth to community demands. As reported in the post [August 1, 1967], a newly formed Negro investigation committee charge that "general slum conditions in the Negro quarter, inadequate recreational facilities in the prevalence of "shoddy businesses" with the prevailing factors for the outburst". This climate apparently energized a new Lake Worth Community Relations Committee. As noted by its Chair, the Rev. O. V. Hitchcock: "In our year of existence, we have only fixed a leaky water fountain and put some dirt down on a path. We've seen the mood of the Negro people reflected in other parts of the country; we could face the same situation if we do not face up to the problems here. Yet only 14 months later, the *Post* quoted I Hitchcock as saying: "most of the problems facing the Negro area have been tackled and solved". [!])

#### **Equal Treatment and Investment**

The September 20 Post reported that the *Afro-American Civic Action Unit* led by Mitchell paraded at City Hall in observance of "Constitution week" – claiming it was not a protest march but "we are letting the people of the city know the Constitution of the United States is not to be abused" (Constitution week had been officially proclaimed by the Mayor a week earlier). As the paper reported, "Mitchell, who sought the aid of Stokely Carmichael and his Atlanta-based Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee said he, too, advocated Carmichael's policy", and quoting him "I believe in black power as far as political education and economic progress is concerned".

The Herald reported on September 29 that Mitchell had presented himself in a budget meeting asking why the budget did not contain certain improvements for the lake Osborne section Mitchell had "demanded" flood lighting for the ballpark at a previous Howard Park special commission meeting.

The attention generated by Mitchell's appearances before the commission provoked a defensive analysis of tax revenues from the Osborne area. On October 13, the *Post* reported on analysis made by the City Manager regarding the payment of taxes from the "Negro Osborne quarter section of the city" – 155 parcels in the 12-block area came to \$7,300,000 of which 3 million was paid by white property owners. The manager reported in the various improvements made in the quarters since 1945. The Manager estimated that the area has a population of a thousand with approximately half of the residents owning their own homes.

On Jan 18, 1967, the *Post* reported on a new zoning ordinance for 12 block "negro section" (Osborne) of Lake Worth from a general all-purpose class to separate areas for single family homes, commercial, and multifamily dwellings. Mitchell attended the meeting with 12 others from the Osborne community, stating that flyers had been distributed in the community explaining the implications of the zoning changes to residents in that the community understood the positive impact -- and supported of the changes, especially as they would permit certain zoning-classification-specific improvements –such as streetlighting to be made.

Later in 1967, Mitchell again appeared before the Commission regarding its Community Relations Committee. As quoted by the *Post*: "Mitchell charged that the Committee spoke only for, what he described as, elite members of the Negro community and not those at the grassroots level". He continued his specific campaign for specific agenda items for the Committee including reevaluation of hiring practices especially with regard to Negroes and supervisory jobs, establishment of the job youth Corps that might be put to work on jobs ranging from street cleaning to supervision and parks, establishment of a civil police review board and park improvements.

#### **Political organizing**

Mitchell was also turning his attention more directly to politics. In December, Mitchell said that the AACAU would begin a voter registration drive in the Osborne section of Lake Worth, claiming that only 129 of the 500 eligible voters have been registered. In January, the *Post* had reported that Mitchell was running a voter registration activity from "the Negro section of the City" in the form of a shuttle service between Osborne and the City Hall registration office. He offered what appeared to be a characteristic cooperative approach, stating "the Commission is doing something to help the people in it only seems right that the people should register so they can help the commission".



Mitchell in 1967 PBP 121868

In February a *Post* headline read "Lake Worth To Answer Demand of Negro Group" regarding action Mitchell had demanded for cleanup program in Osborne in the previous year. The city manager, reflecting the leverage of Mitchell's requests and his visibility reported that the request for stadium lighting was simply awaiting a budget request and the demand to resurface streets was already in progress. He also reported that Mitchell's request for improved street lighting had to be postponed until the city had passed zoning ordinance with the appropriate commercial area, but that this was in progress. The manager also reported that "Mitchell's final demand for the removal of junk cars has resulted in bids being accepted in the contract being drawn up

During this period, Mitchell was also active elsewhere in Palm Beach County. In May, Mitchell appeared before the Palm Beach County Community Action Council and said that his organization had been denied representation on the technical advisory board -- and that this denial was probably instigated by the existing black organizations "that shun the programs and the tactics of the AACAU". He said that the focus of his group was to continue to "serve as a militant watchdog and a whip to assure the true purpose of the CAC's programs instead of just creating lucrative jobs for the middle class " Mitchell also appeared in front of other County organizations regarding such issues as police brutality, parks improvement, civilian policy review board, phasing out of Negro schools, ambulance service, black appointments to senior school administration, low income housing, school district gerrymandering, teaching of black history, and a set of new program focuses regarding the makeup and activities of the West Palm Beach community relations committee. At one district legislative clinic, Mitchell appeared and gave a statement calling for a bill that would "prohibit the sale of Florida souvenirs and similar items created to portray or symbolize members of the black race in an indigent and humiliating manner" In some instances established community relations organizations in the county took more conservative views about the need for action.

Late in 1967, in an appearance before the Palm Beach County School Board, Mitchell made one of his few statements regarding school integration saying that "school integration is promoting white

supremacy. Negro children always have suffered from inferior facilities, he said, and are choosing to attend predominantly white schools because they are of superior. The result is leaving empty classrooms and largely Negro schools because they are substandard". When one board member noted that she had visited a black school and could not agree that it was substandard, Mitchell replied that in his judgment "the school is substandard because it is not white".

# Mitchell's Philosophy

Mitchell's next appearance in the local newspapers occurs almost a year later, in a December 1968 interview as part of a *Post* three-part series on "Negro problems". In the interview, Mitchell explained his philosophy: "If blacks unite, and separate themselves so they will be psychologically removed from white indoctrination, they will achieve racial pride and then they will be able to progress". As the interviewer reported "some negroes said Mitchell speaks for only a handful of blacks. Others, while disclaiming him, said the views he espouses are gaining more and more support among blacks in Palm Beach County. Mitchell stated that black should not strive for integration but for equality".

During early 1969 Mitchell was apparently moving from community advocacy and organization to electoral politics. In December, a *Post* column portrays Mitchell as a political organizer, focused on mobilizing a crossover vote to get more Blacks into the Republican Party for political reasons, as part of a statewide movement called "the Concerned Negro Republicans in Florida. Throughout the year, Mitchell appears in *Post* articles focused on electoral politics and his registration efforts.



Mitchell in 1979 Source PBB 121379

In late 1970, Mitchell became Political Coordinator of the Tri-County black Republican Coalition focused on the November mid-term election in the Nixon administration. In October, the *Post* quoted Mitchell saying that he was considering resigning from his three-year-old organization – the AACAU -- because

members felt he was using the organization urge Blacks into the Republican Party. He said his decision to resign or stay with the AACAU at an "Afro-American unity conference to be held shortly".

Apparently engaged in state political organizing in the early 1970s, Mitchell is absent from the news until 1975. A 1975 *Post* article reports Mitchell at a meeting regarding Palm Beach County Charter reform. A year later, the newspapers depict him as a delegate supporting Gerald Ford at the 1976 Republican Convention saying: "Blacks can and will accept the conservative philosophy provided it is explained clearly and on a commonsense basis"

In his last appearance in the local press (December 30, 1979) as part of *Post* special section about "what I will remember from the 1970s" under the heading "Black Community has Seesaw Decade" reads as follows: "Robert "Bob" Mitchell Senior, 47, black civic political activist: for me, this was a pretty good decade. Some of the things I was involved in met with success.... For the black community this was a seesaw decade. We won some things, and we lost some things."