

TODAY

THURSDAY, APRIL 24, 2003

MITZI SWAN RECALLS A 1948 CIVIL RIGHTS INCIDENT THAT CHANGED HER LIFE AND BECAME THE SUBJECT OF H.L. MENCKEN'S FINAL COLUMN.



JED KIRSCHBAUM: SUN STAFF

Mitzi Swan said, "It wasn't a law. It was the policy, and the policy said no interracial sports ... And we were testing that."

TENNIS, EVERYONE?

By CARL SCHOETTLER
SUN STAFF

The 12-year-old boy watched his big sister and her friends being pulled from the tennis courts, arrested, packed into police cars and paddy wagons and hauled off to jail.

"They didn't do anything wrong," David Freishtat cried. "They were just playing tennis."

That's pretty much what H.L. Mencken, the renowned Baltimore editor and critic, said in the last column he published before a massive stroke ended his long writing career for the Sunpapers.

On July 11, 1948, David's sister, Mitzi Swan, and her African-American tennis partner, Mary Coffee, walked onto the "whites only" courts at Druid Hill Park and stepped into Baltimore's civil rights history.

Swan was Mitzi Freishtat then, 18 years old and a sophomore at the University of Maryland. Mary Coffee was 19 and a student at Morgan State College, as it was then called.

Swan had barely bounced a ball on the court when park police appeared.

"As soon as we dropped the ball and were ready to swing at it, they were there," she says. "We were start-



This picture shows four young women on a tennis court near Finlayson Dr. in Druid Hill Park on Sunday, before park police came and took them to jail on the charge of violating park regulations prohibiting interracial tennis.

Swan (left), Mary Coffee, Jeanette Fino and Gloria Stewart opposed the Druid Hill Park tennis courts policy. Swan, then 18, will speak on the incident Saturday at the Pratt Library.

ing to warm up. I think we may have gotten it over the net once."

She and Coffee and another dozen players were arrested for refusing to obey the order of the park police to stop playing on courts reserved exclusively for whites.

Altogether 24 people were arrested, including seven charged with disorderly conduct while protesting the arrest of the players. Among the group was Charles M. Swan, who would later become Freishtat's husband.

If not *the* first, it was among the first interracial protests against segregation in Baltimore.

The tennis court cases went to the Supreme Bench of Baltimore City, now the Circuit Court, where seven people were convicted, including Swan's husband-to-be. Seventeen cases were dismissed, including hers.

On Saturday, Swan will talk about the protest and her arrest at the Spring Meeting of the Mencken Society. The meeting will be at 2:30 p.m. at the Enoch Pratt Central Library.

Mencken's column appeared in *The Sun* on Nov. 9, 1948, after the verdicts were in. An old Supreme Bench rule prevented comment earlier. Mencken laces into the "irra- [See Tennis, 5E]

From the tennis court to Supreme Court

[Tennis, from Page 1E]

tional and nefarious" tennis order.

"A free citizen in a free state," he writes, "has an inalienable right to play with whomsoever he will, so long as he does not disturb the general peace. If any other citizen, offended by the spectacle, makes a pother, then that other citizen, and not the man exercising his inalienable right, should be put down by the police."

Swan was surprised and pleased.

"I didn't think he would take this kind of a stand," she says. "I was very pleasantly surprised. It was supportive. ... He says Maryland still has a bit of 'the Georgia Cracker' and that we have to wipe 'Ku Kluxy' out of the state of Maryland."

Two weeks later, Mencken was incapacitated by the stroke that left him unable to read or write for the next eight years, until his death on Jan. 29, 1956.

Swan says the genesis of her appearance at the Mencken Society meeting is a story she wrote for a "learning in retirement" class called Memory Pictures at the College of Notre Dame's Renaissance Institute.

"The assignment to the class was to write about an event that affected your life. And this one definitely did."

She laughs.

"I mean, I met my husband there."

Nineteen forty-eight was the year of the Progressive Party, a left-liberal party with a strong civil-rights plank. The Progressive Party convention in Philadelphia would be the last Mencken covered. He had reported on his first political convention in 1904. He seemed more amused than alarmed by the Progressive left of 1948. And they passed away with the victory of Harry S. Truman that fall.

"I belonged to the Young Progressives," Swan says. "That was the youth component of the Progressive Party of Maryland. That was a third party, and Henry Wallace was the person running for president. I believed in his platform and one of the big items on his platform was equal rights."

But she didn't consider herself "radical."

"This is what I believed in," she says. "We were trying to find something to make a statement



The Druid Hill Park tennis courts remained segregated until the 1950s. It was Mitzi Swan's (below) and others' efforts, along with an H.L. Mencken column, that brought attention to the whites-only policy.



JED KIRSCHBAUM : SUN STAFF

Mitzi Swan

When: 2:30 p.m. Saturday

Where: Enoch Pratt Free Library, Poe Room, 400 Cathedral St.

Admission: Free

Call: 410-396-5430

and a lot of us played tennis."

Swan, who is white, was on the Western High tennis team, and she played often on the clay courts at Druid Hill Park. She lived on Whittier Avenue, off Auchentoroly Terrace, right across the street from the courts. Her brother, David, who watched her being trundled off to jail, became one of the top players in Baltimore. He's a lawyer still in

practice here.

"We were trying to break a barrier," she says. "The park policy would not allow us to play. It wasn't a law. It was the policy, and the policy said no interracial sports on the courts. And we were testing that."

The courts where blacks could play were

terrible.

"There were just a few of them," Swan says. "They were overgrown with weeds and ruts. They were in terrible condition. Just the same with the swimming pool. They had a swimming pool for blacks. They had water fountains for blacks and whites! They couldn't drink out of the same water fountains!"

She was on the planning committee for the protest, and she and another white player, Albert Blank, went over to the park to get permits to play — good, of course, for white people only. Then she went home and waited.

"It was 8 o'clock in the morning, and this wasn't going to start until 2 o'clock and ... it's a long time to be nervous. I was nervous as I could be."

But she takes that as a natu-

ral reaction.

"You knew you were going to be arrested for playing on courts with a black person," she says. "We had notified the police department, the park board, the newspapers; we put out fliers in the area. Stuff like that to make it well-known."

People were already coming to the park when she returned about 12:30 p.m. They brought blankets and picnic baskets and spread out on the little slope overlooking the tennis courts. The papers said as many as 500 people were there.

"It was very festive," Swan says. "Blacks and whites. People from the [African-American] Baltimore Tennis Club, their friends and relatives. People from the Young Progressives and the Progressive Party itself came. People who read about it on fliers and things like that came. It was like a celebration ... until the cops came around."

There were 20 officers, she says. "They stood on the crest of the hill, hand-billy on one hip and holstered pistol gun on the other. They had those batons there. They were ready to club a couple of heads. They were expecting a riot. They didn't get a riot."

"This was completely non-violent," she says, laughing again. "None of us were the violent type. There was to be no violence and there wasn't."

Excerpt

Excerpts from H.L. Mencken's Nov. 9, 1948, *Sun* column:

... There remains an underlying question, and it deserves to be considered seriously and without any reference whatever to the cases lately at bar. It is this: Has the Park Board any right in law to forbid white and black citizens, if they are so inclined, to join in harmless games together on public playgrounds? Again: Is such a prohibition, even supposing it is lawful, supported by anything to be found in common sense and common decency?

I do not undertake to answer the first question, for I am too ignorant of law, but my answer to the second is a loud and unequivocal No. A free citizen in a free state, it seems to me, has an inalienable right to play with whomsoever he will, so long as he does not disturb the general peace. If any other citizen, offended by the spectacle, makes a pother, then that other citizen, and not the man

exercising his inalienable right, should be put down by the police.

Certainly it is astounding to find so much of the spirit of the Georgia Cracker surviving in the Maryland Free State, and under official auspices. The public parks are supported by the taxpayers, including the colored taxpayer, for the health and pleasure of the whole people. Why should cops be sent into them to separate those people, against their will, into separate herds? Why should the law set up distinctions and discriminations which the persons directly affected themselves reject?

... It is high time that all such relics of Ku Kluxy be wiped out in Maryland. The position of the colored people ... has been gradually improving in the State, and it has already reached a point surpassed by few other states. But there is still plenty of room for further advances. ... The Park Board rule is irrational and nefarious. It should be got rid of forthwith.

The crowd called the police "Storm Troopers" and "Gestapo" when they began arresting the players.

"And they started singing, very spontaneously, 'America: My Country, 'Tis of Thee.' Everybody sang it. There was nobody I knew of [who] started it. It wasn't planned. This just happened. It did give you chills."

They were arrested and taken to Northern District stationhouse in Hampden, and the crowd followed and waited until their release on bail a couple of hours later. It was a Sunday, and there was no court.

"We were heroes," Swan says. "They had a big party that night."

"That's when I met Charlie, at the party," she says. He was a seaman. "I didn't really date him for a couple of years. I was busy going to college. I graduated in 1951."

They were married that same year. They had two daughters: Margaret, a sculptor in Boston, and Carol, a lawyer in Annapolis. Charlie and Mitzi ran a painting contractor business for years, until he died in 1982.

The convictions of Charlie Swan and the other six protesters were appealed all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which

declined to review the case.

The tennis courts at Druid Hill Park remained segregated for another five years or so.

But Mitzi Swan never thought her action was a useless gesture. She continued to join protests against segregated seating at Ford's Theatre and the Lyric.

Nothing was integrated in Baltimore then.

"No," she says, "not that I remember. The movies weren't, the restaurants weren't, the housing wasn't."

"That's one of the points I will bring out," she says. "This was right after [World War II] and nothing changed. All these people came back from fighting the war. The blacks came back from a segregated Army into a segregated community. Nothing changed. ... It was a 'whites only' world."

Swan doesn't go to demonstrations now. She's dynamic and youthful, but she is, after all, 73. She writes letters and makes phone calls. She opposes the war in Iraq.

"I have a pin I was wearing, 'Women Against the War,'" she says. She's quite articulate in her opposition.

"When you believe in something," she says, "you have to act on your beliefs."