

... building and a membership of more than 400.

Black churches in the twin cities number more than 30, according to the Rev. Roland Brown of St. Luke Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, Champaign.

"The black church has always been an integral part of our community," Brown said.

Brown has researched the history of the black churches in Champaign-Urbana and written pieces for an African-American history study at the Early American Museum, Mahomet.

He's also documenting the existing black churches in Champaign-Urbana with photographs.

The churches are the center of black history because for decades the church was the only meeting place black people could call their own, he said.

The church was used for educating black children Monday through Friday.

It was the social center of the

said.

"I do, all the time. And most of us do," Nettles said. "That's a part of our mission, our calling."

The music in the services is also different. The Rev. Claude Shelby Sr. of Salem Baptist Church said there's more music in black services, and it tends to be gospel, blues and rhythm and blues, rather than traditional hymns.

"A white minister friend of mine says that our services are primarily music interspersed with some other things," Shelby laughed. "I said I never thought about that, but maybe he's right."

"People do enjoy the singing," he said. "And the style of worship is different. The black worship tends to be more ... lively. People express themselves more, they would be more vocal and say 'Amen' to some truth that is said in the sermon. Whereas our white counterparts are mostly quiet. I've preached in both churches, and it is quite

different."

But the biggest difference, Nettles said, is in the attention the black churches pay to the issue of being a minority in America.

"We're trying to redo a couple centuries of negative thinking, so we've always had to say that with God's help we can do anything anybody else can," Nettles said. "Our people have to be told that constantly. Just because you're black doesn't mean you cannot achieve. We have to tell our own people that and tell you people that also. And that's been our mission for over 200 years."

And that's why the black churches are the strongest institutions in the black communities, Shelby said. The black people don't own the banks, own few businesses and may not have much voice in government, but the churches are their own. And when someone wants to "talk" to the black communities, they start with the black ministers.

The recent series of church burnings in the area put those institutions in the spotlight, and Shelby said that's a concern here.

"I do believe that many of the burnings are motivated by a feeling that most of the advances made by the black Americans has been through the leadership in the church," Shelby said. "No one wanted to hit them at their strongest point."

In the context of the recent-day church burnings, it makes one wonder at the age of the founders of the churches in the context of the Civil War. Brown, of the CME Church, said he admires the perseverance of the founders.

"The people knew how to have a spirituality despite the stained glass windows, the pews and a big canopy," Brown said. "They had a spiritual understanding

Area subdivisions contend with state

By GREG KLINE

News-Gazette Staff Writer

URBANA — Yankee Ridge subdivision residents are struggling with the notion of installing a pay phone and restrooms at the small, private lake they refer to as "the pond."

Besides cost, it is a matter of aesthetics, admits Maureen McCord, who lives in the subdivision. "Just how good looking can you make an outhouse," she said?

The pond at Yankee Ridge, which residents say gets maybe a couple swimmers a day, falls under new state regulations governing "public bathing beaches."

The regulations — basically an extension to lakes of some long-time swimming pool rules — had Champaign County Forest Preserve District officials thinking about closing its beaches earlier this summer. They ultimately decided against it.

Likewise, most of the other licensed beach operators in East Central Illinois have decided they can live with the rules, so far.

"We don't seem to be having any problems with it," said Dixie Sturges, manager of the Sparkling Springs Resort outside Danville.

But some subdivision residents are thinking about putting up a fight if the state pushes them.

"We're not a public beach,"

said Nick Schneider, who lives in the Briarcliff subdivision in Mahomet. "This commode thing is crazy."

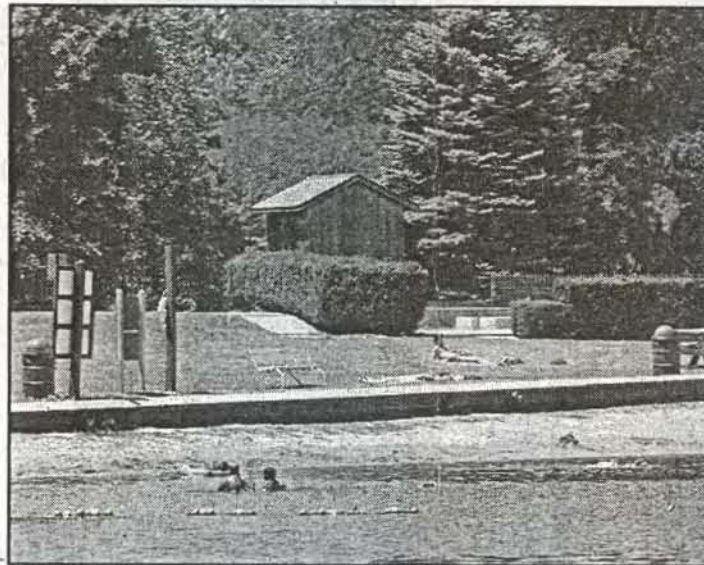
The law covers any body of water used for public swimming, including lakes in subdivisions with five or more living units and a commonly owned beach area.

Around here, that takes in everything from Yankee Ridge's pond to the forest preserve district's Lake of the Woods near Mahomet, as well as facilities such as the University of Illinois 4-H Memorial Camp in Piatt County and Clinton Lake in De Witt County.

Four subdivisions in Champaign County — Yankee Ridge and Briarcliff, Maynard Lake in Champaign and Meadowlake at Mahomet — are affected, said Bruce Hawkins of the Illinois Department of Public Health's local office. No subdivisions in Vermilion County fall under the rules, he said.

Among other things, the regulations require a toilet for each sex within 300 feet of the shoreline, and a telephone with posted emergency numbers within 500 feet.

They also require beach operators to turn away swimmers with contagious diseases and infants who aren't wearing tight-fitting rubber pants and to ban food, drink, gum and tobacco from the water.



News-Gazette photo

State beach regulations, which include a requirement for restrooms and phones, affect the beach at Lake of the Woods Park near Mahomet. The beach was almost empty Friday.

All this stems from a record number of beach closings in 1995 because of water quality problems, state health department officials say. The most serious incident, in the Rockford area, sickened a dozen children and hospitalized three for a month. It was blamed on bacteria from swimmers defecating in the water.

"These requirements can better assure the safety of thousands of persons who enjoy the state's beaches each summer," said Dr. John Lumpkin, state di-

rector of public health announcing the new rules.

Beach operators, who have to test the water before, now have to submit samples per month to the department.

The state can close a beach if it doesn't comply with regulations or fails its water quality test, said health department spokeswoman Karen Grueter.

But Grueter said the department prefers to help operators comply if possible.

So far this summer

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are trying to redo a couple of negative thinking, we always had to say that God's help we can do anybody else can," Nettles said. "Our people have to be told constantly. Just because black doesn't mean you can't achieve. We have to tell people that and tell you that also. And that's been the case for over 200 years." That's why the black churches are the strongest institutions in the black community, Shelby said. The black people don't own the banks, own few businesses and may not have a voice in government, but churches are their own. And someone wants to "talk" to black communities, they talk with the black ministers.

The recent series of black church burnings in the South has put those institutions under attack, and Shelby said the incidents are a concern here also.

"I do believe that most of the burnings are motivated by the feeling that most of the advances made by the African-Americans has been through the leadership in the churches," Shelby said. "No doubt they wanted to hit them at their strongest point."

In the context of the present-day church burnings, it makes one wonder at the courage of the founders of the black churches in the context of the Civil War. Brown, of St. Luke CME Church, said he admires the perseverance of the early founders.

"The people knew how to have a spirituality despite not having stained glass windows, padded pews and a big cathedral," Brown said. "They had a deep spiritual understanding of them-

■ Salem Baptist Church: At 500 E. Park St., C. Salem is the second oldest black church in Champaign-Urbana and was organized in 1867 with help from white Baptist churches here and in Mahomet. The old portion of the church dates back to the turn of the century and is the longest-standing black church in the community. A large brick addition with a new sanctuary and meeting rooms was completed three years ago.

■ St. Luke Christian Methodist Episcopal: The CME denomination was started in Tennessee in 1870. CME, which stood for Colored Methodist Episcopal until 1954, sprang from a predominantly white Methodist denomination called the Methodist Episcopal South.

The St. Luke CME church at 809 N. Fifth St., C, was organized in 1909. Most of the members of the original congregation came from Kentucky. One of its first ministers, the Rev. W.T. Whitsitt, was a tall, lanky man who could have passed for white, but joined the movement to create a local church for his people.

— BECKY MABRY

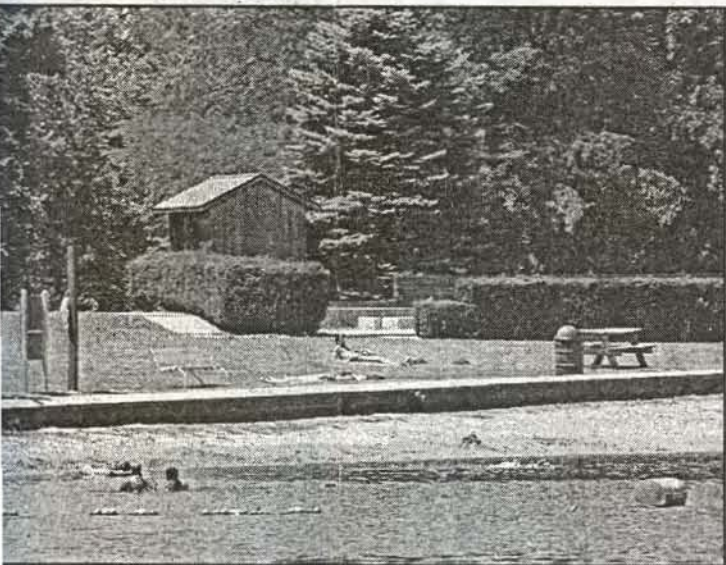
selves and of God to say we know that's not the church, the church is within us.

"It makes you very humble as far as how we have progressed." The number of churches — more than 30 — underscores the progress that has been made since

that handful of former slaves gathered to worship in a home.

"We should never forget those who took what little they had and made the best of it," Brown said. "They had a vision. They loved their church and they had a sense of pride."

ntend with state beach regulations



News-Gazette photo by Robin Scholz

beach regulations, which include a requirement for public restrooms and phones, affect the beach at Lake of the Woods County near Mahomet. The beach was almost empty Friday afternoon.

The problem stems from a record number of beach closings in Champaign County because of water quality problems, state health department officials say. The most recent incident, in the Rockford area, sickened a dozen children and hospitalized three for a week. It was blamed on bacterium-swimmers defecating in the water.

The new requirements can betwixt the safety of thousands of persons who enjoy the beaches each summer," John Lumpkin, state di-

rector of public health, in announcing the new rules.

Beach operators, who didn't have to test the water regularly before, now have to submit two samples per month to the health department.

The state can close a beach if it doesn't comply with the regulations or fails its water tests, said health department spokeswoman Karen Grueter.

But Grueter said the department prefers to help operators comply if possible.

So far this summer, no

beaches have been closed for violating the regulations, Grueter said.

A total of 39 have been shut down temporarily for water quality problems.

The only area beach shut down, at Timbered Meadows campground in Iroquois County, was closed for a week in late June when tests showed unacceptable levels of the same bacteria blamed in the Rockford incident last year.

The lake's tests have been fine since. Harold Gossett, one of the campground's owners, attributed the problem to runoff from a nearby creek that overflowed in heavy rains.

"That's when it (the bacteria count) came back high," he said. "Right now, I'm OK."

Most lakes in the state are prone to such situations because they are small, fed by runoff instead of a stream or spring and thus static, said John Potts, Champaign County Forest Preserve District executive director.

Meanwhile, Potts said, the forest district's lakes at Lake of the Woods County Park north of Mahomet and the Middle Fork River Forest Preserve have an additional problem — Canadian geese.

Two summers ago, Lake of the Woods was closed for more than a week after several swimmers became ill, apparently from wa-

ter contaminated by goose feces.

Potts said the birds represent a Catch-22 for the district. On the one hand, the new state regulations require it to keep wildlife debris and waste off the beach. On the other, federal law says it can't move the geese or any other migratory waterfowl.

Still, it was the regulations governing the actions of people more than geese that concerned the district's board when it considered closing the beaches altogether in June.

Yankee Ridge resident McCord, who is also a forest preserve board member, said the water quality testing program is a good service by the state.

But hiring employees to monitor, for example, children for rubber pants would have been expensive. The district traditionally hasn't used lifeguards or other supervisors at its beaches. Potts put the cost to do so at \$52,000 to \$72,000 annually.

"We can't really afford to do the close kind of supervision," he said. "Whenever we've got employees (in the beach area), they keep their eye out. As far as we know, we're in compliance."

Grueter said the health department isn't asking for constant monitoring. However, she said beach operators must make an effort to enforce the rules, which have to be posted where patrons will see them.

Churches central to black history

■ Bethel, oldest C-U black church, dates to Civil War

By BECKY MABRY
News-Gazette Staff Writer

They came from the South, newly freed slaves looking for opportunities, and they settled in the predominantly German neighborhoods on the north side of Champaign and Urbana.

Because of the times and mind-set of the mid-1800s, blacks weren't welcome in other areas of the cities.

And they weren't welcome to worship in the local churches.

So a handful of the former slaves gathered together in a house on the north side of Champaign sometime in 1863 and worshipped together.

Though the Civil War was still raging and their safety even in this free state was not assured, they took the bold step of proclaiming ownership in something.

It wasn't so much a building as it was a feeling of coming together and believing in something.

They called themselves a congregation and named their church the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Their next bold step was to put up a building.

They scraped together \$600, enough to put up a small frame structure at 405 E. Park St., C, and declared themselves in the business of serving the Lord.

Today, being the first black church in Champaign-Urbana is a great source of pride to the Bethel AME members, says the Rev. John Nettles Jr.

Their church is still on East Park Street, a few doors down from the original spot, and the membership numbers 311.

Salem Baptist Church, just up the street, started in a similar

black community when they weren't welcome in movie houses or other public places.

And though we've almost approached the year 2000, the black churches are still an integral part of the community.

Their doors are open to people of all races, but they draw mostly black members.

Likewise, churches that have drawn traditionally white members still have a white majority.

"Martin Luther King said the most segregated hour in America is 11 o'clock on Sunday mornings," Nettles said. "That was true 25 years ago, and it's true today."

But that's OK, said Nettles, because no matter what race people are, they like to worship with people they feel comfortable with and who are like themselves.

And there is an undeniable difference between white and black churches.

He has seen it when he and the Rev. Steve Shoemaker of the McKinley Presbyterian church exchange pulpits.

"Whereas we both had our Hebrew and Latin and Greek and theological studies, there is something different about the black religious experience and the way we worship," Nettles said. "It all goes back to our heritage from Africa. It's the same way there's a difference in soul music and country and western music."

"And in our church — the African-American church whatever denomination — has always had to address the issue of slavery and second-class citizenship and discrimination in this nation. So our leadership has not always been concerned with just getting to heaven.

"We want to go to heaven," he said, "but we want our kids to be able to go to school, and we want our people to be able to go as far as their talents will take them."



An early Sunday school class of the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church poses in front of the church on East Park Street.



The Rev. John Nettles Jr., left, of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church and the Rev. Claude Shelby Sr. of Salem Baptist Church in front of Bethel. The ministers were at the church Wednesday.

NEWS / EAST CENTRAL ILLINOIS



Photo courtesy of Erma Bridgewater

Early Sunday school class of the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal church poses in front of the church on East Park Street. Bethel is

the oldest black church in Champaign, founded by former slaves in 1863. There are now more than 30 black churches in the twin cities.



News-Gazette photo by Robin Scholz

Rev. John Nettles Jr., left, of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal and the Rev. Claude Shelby Sr. of Salem Baptist Church stand in front of Bethel. The ministers were at the church Wednesday.

Brief histories of local black churches

■ **Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church:** The oldest black church in Champaign-Urbana, Bethel AME at 401 E. Park St., C, is part of a denomination that dates back to the early 1700s in Philadelphia.

Before this country was founded, the African Methodist Episcopal denomination was organized by a slave named Richard Allen after he led a walk-out at the St. George's Methodist church in Philadelphia. At that church, black members could sit only in the balcony and could not take communion until after the whites. They were also not allowed to worship before the altar.

Allen held his first church meetings in a blacksmith shop, preaching from behind an anvil. Today the anvil remains a part of the AME church symbol. There are AME churches around the world today, said the Rev. John Nettles Jr., minister at Bethel. AME is widely held to be the oldest black



THE REV. W.T. WHITSITT