

— hidden — HISTORY

The civil rights exhibit currently on display at the Hankey Center (running through Reunion Weekend 2015) documents an array of racial justice issues that challenged the College and the Chambersburg community—and mirrored the fight that was going on nationally.

In the late 1950s, Wilson students were confronted with news of civil rights sit-ins, protests and marches. Wilson students from a variety of college organizations, including the Wilson College Government Association (WCGA) and the *Billboard*, were drawn to the issue as they became more aware of widespread prejudice and instances of injustice.

As early as 1958, the *Billboard* carried editorials on race relations. A series of strong, independent *Billboard* editors, including Suzanne Sunday Sanderson '60, Elizabeth "Betty" Mohn Ericksen '60, Loretta Hunt Marion '61 and Judith Hummer Smith '63, relentlessly covered these issues.

WCGA meetings addressed what the Wilson students could do to alleviate discrimination in their own community. This led to a *Billboard* project on the issue of unfair labor practices, with reporters calling area businesses to survey whether or not they employed and/or served African-Americans. The *Billboard* then printed the eye-opening results in its April 22, 1960, issue.

The state of racial prejudice hit particularly close to home in the fall of 1960 when a group of black and white Wilson students were refused service at the Penn-Wilson Restaurant just off the square in Chambersburg. Outraged students in the group brought the issue up to WCGA to gain support for a college-wide boycott of the restaurant. "If a restaurant can carry the name of our college," one student declared, "it should serve all of our students."

At first, the WCGA cabinet leaders were reluctant to institute a boycott of the Penn-Wilson unless it was a unanimous vote. A majority vote would impose its will on a minority, "which is exactly the problem against which we are struggling," stated a *Billboard* article from Nov. 18, 1960.

But several impassioned letters to the editor in the *Billboard* swayed the WCGA cabinet. "I wish to extend my thanks to the Wilson student body ... for saying that they believe discrimination is wrong, although they lack the fortitude and desire to actively support their 'principle,'" Freida Greer '62 pointedly wrote.

On Dec. 2, 1960, members of the WCGA voted, and although the vote was not unanimous, the student body issued a policy stating they would boycott the Penn-Wilson Restaurant. A student could defy the boycott "on grounds of conscience" but would risk the "disapproval and pressure of the student body," according to the policy.

WCGA President Lynn Negus '61 met with the restaurant owner to try to persuade him to change his discriminatory practices. The owner responded that while he would be sorry to lose the Wilson business and that he was not personally racist, he had to accept the wishes of his clientele, who did not feel comfortable around black people.

Negus then wrote a letter to the editor of Chambersburg's newspaper, *Public Opinion*, explaining the reason for the boycott. Eventually, the district attorney of Franklin County met with the owner, reminding him it was against the law to refuse to serve black customers. The owner capitulated and said while blacks would not be turned away, he could not guarantee a friendly atmosphere. There were no subsequent incidents at the restaurant.

For more stories about Wilson's involvement with the civil rights movement, visit the Hankey Center exhibit, which will run through June 6.

—Amy Ensley



Members of Students for A Democratic Society at Wilson (shown above) were active in civil rights issues during the 1960s.