

James Harrison Interview Nov. 19, 2007

Location: Green's Mini-Mart and Gas Station

James Harrison: Yes, I am James Harrison. I moved to Asheville in 1951. Graduated from Stephens-Lee H.S. in 1955; attended Florida A and M Univ. for a couple of years, went into the military; got out of the military in 1964; went back to school at Livingstone Coll. in Salisbury, NC. And come back to Asheville where my parents still resided. My father retired from the Veterans Admin, as a cook, my mother self-employed as a beautician, which she still does every now and then.

Karen VanEman: Wow!

JH: Yes, it's a beautiful wow; she's 90 years old. She gets around great. And we attend Hopkins Chapel AME Zion Church. I have one sister and I presently have two children, one grandchild. My daughter Venus Golden, she lives in L.A. and has had some small parts in movies and also she appeared in Heat of the Night.

My son, James Longmire Harrison, who is an attorney in Washington, D.C., who resides in Bowie, Maryland, and I guess that's about where we are right now. But you want to get into the meat of the conversation as far the Urban Renewal. As I can remember at this time, we lived on Pine Grove, 99 Pine Grove Ave., which no longer exists because of this "Urban Renewal" program. We were asked over and over about selling our property, which we did not want to do, but were more or less forced into it, which wasn't very comfortable, especially with my mother and my father. It hurt them very much. Mom put up a heck of a fight, but today Erskine Apts. is there where our home used to be.

KV: So the government wanted their property to build Erskine Apts., not necessarily condemning it.

JH: No, no, this was a new home. We just built it. We were living at 143 Blanton St. [within the bounds of the E. Riverside Redevelopment Project], but we moved to 99 Pine Grove and our new home, and when this came up, they [the

Development Authority] wanted that particular property. But naturally we were very reluctant about giving in to their wanting it. So it just led to a lot of, I guess, mental problems and anxieties and emotions and everything else because it affected my mom quite a bit.

KV: And then where did your parents go?

JH: Well, we moved to where we are now, at 273 Rock Hill Rd, more-or-less in the Shiloh area.

KV: You say your parents, you mom, particularly experienced mental stress and anxiety, and I imagine that would be the case.

JH: Oh yes, oh yes. There's no doubt about it. But you know, you're just a little, small fish in this pond. I can't say they twist your arm. They just don't leave you very much choice. I'll just put it that way. So, that's what we were up against at the time. So I don't have a whole lot of good, good thoughts about this at all; I guess I would say I'm rather biased about it, quite a bit.

KV: How did your parents... how long did it take for your parents... or did they ever finish working through the stress? Excuse my awkwardness in figuring out how to ask about that.

JH: Well, I guess, they would want to say they got over it in a reasonable time. I mean, it's hard; it's not an easy thing to do, but once you accept the fact that it's just a way of life, I guess, once you get down, that does not mean you have to stay down. You get back up and try again. It just took a lot out of my parents because — I went in the military in 1960, and we were still at 99 Pine Grove. So I wasn't here to help them in this fight.

KV: Maybe you've said this earlier: Did you have any brothers and sisters.?

JH: Just one sister.

KV: Was she here at the time?

JH: No, she wasn't here. She was in Pompano Beach, FL, at the time. She was married.

KV: So your parents didn't have any immediate family to help them.

JH: No. Just the two of them. All of this, at the time it would leave a bitter taste in one's mouth, but you just have to leave it in the hands of the right person and let him handle it. That's the way we chose to do it.

KV: Did your parents have any other friends or neighbors who were going through the same process?

JH: Now, that, I could not truthfully say. I'm sure there might have been a couple more on the street at the time, because we had just built ... it was a new place for us at the time, and we knew it was right behind St. Genevieve-of-the-Pines--that was what was behind us. [St. Genevieve-of-the-Pines was a private college run by Sisters of the Order of Christian Education, well known for its secretarial training.] So whatever homes were in that area-which wasn't very many-maybe two or three at the most-they [the City] wanted that whole area. So that's the way things sort of went. Right now, I guess St. Genevieve- of- the-Pines is no longer there either. Now it's A-B Tech. So they got all that property now. But as you turn down Pine Grove off Livingston St., the first apartment there is where our home used to be. Where that street enters, that's where I used to park my car under a big tree there, just go up the hill and go in the back door. Yeah, I can still see it.

KV: Oh can you? oh gosh.

JH: Yeah, just one of those things.

KV: What did you say your dad did? I'm sorry to make you repeat yourself.

JH: He retired from the Veterans Admin, as a cook. He passed away in 1995. Once the people, the higher ups in this area decide they want to purchase property to achieve what they would like, sometimes the little person just doesn't have the means to really fight it. And it's bad, but that's just sort of the way it is: The big dogs get what they want. I mean, I, uh, you can talk until you're blue in the face- just cause yourself a lot of personal anxiety, this kind of stuff, which you don't need. But people higher up they know, "By being persistent about this, either eventually they're gonna' give in or they're gonna' go crazy as the devil because I'm going to be very persistent about this." And sometimes you can be stubborn too, and be just as persistent, and say, "Well, I'm gonna' be just as

persistent NOT to do as they are TO do," and now you're really going back and forth there, which is sort of the way things worked out in this pattern, this respect. But, um, sometimes you might get a little delay- maybe 3 months, 6 months, a year, something like that-but they never give up that idea that "We're gonna' get this property." You know.

KV: Did you ever get any sense from your parents as to whether or not they thought they got fair market value for their new house?

JH: Oh, well, I would say, what they were offered at the time, I guess they got fair market value I guess because -Mom wouldn't talk about it too awful much because she was out there when they were building every day. She really was invested in that new house, besides the money aspect. Yeah, yeah. 'Cause Dad couldn't do that because he was working. Yeah, she was there during most of the construction of the house. So I guess one could say that they might have received fair market value at the time.

KV: Do you have any sense of whether or not-it sounds to me, judging from what I've heard here- that the quality of their life deteriorated.

JH: Oh yes, it's painful. It really hurt. You know, when you decide to build some place, you put a lot of thought into that before you get to that point. And once you get to that point and do it, and then you come into the type of situation like this, it's painful. It's not like, y'know, you can take an aspirin and it'll go away. This is a twenty-four hour problem.

KV: How'd they decide to move where they did, on Rock Hill?

JH: Well, that I... I don't know. I couldn't truthfully say; I could speculate on that, but I guess Mom would be the best person to ask that question to.

KV: Do you mind filling us in now on some more about your own life. The military?

JH: I got out of the military in '62, and have been here, more or less. Well, let's see, I went to Livingstone College in Jan. of '62.-no got out of the military in Dec. of '62, so I went to college Jan of '63. Then I got married in '64, something like that, and then I started working with the Norfolk Southern Railway. I started as a brakeman, and uh, this was just a fight within itself.

KV: Was it?

JH: Yes it was.

KV: What do you mean by that?

JH: When I say it was just a fight within itself, it's because you were getting involved in a field of work where very few Blacks were, and they were not, say, that acceptable in that line of work. Most Blacks had worked at the railroad had worked by the tracks or had worked in the Roundhouse, places like that-not on the locomotives themselves.

KV: So you were surrounded by whites on the job, then.

JH: Yes, I think I was about the third person who was hired as a brakeman; I know there was a couple more older than I was. So it was just, uh, a struggle within itself. But you knew what it was about before you got the job, because Martin Luther King had come out with a certain percent of Blacks working to have what they call equal-they had a quota they had to meet. So just because they had that quota, they would hire you, but they wouldn't make it likable enough so that you'd want to stay. If anything, they'd discourage you more. They wanted you to leave. All they wanted the record to show was "We tried. We have these names on our lists who were here; they decided to leave." That's the game they played.

KV: And you had a sense that this was ... JH: Oh sure. I knew that before I got into it.

KV: So on a daily basis, it was not easy?

JH: Oh no, no, no. Far from it. It was very tough: mentally, physically, emotionally, everything, in every kind of way you could make it. Because here, we had to have mental toughness to have the stick-to-itiveness, you know, just to hang in there. Any really, really weak person would give it up quickly. But y'know, it was a job that everyone thought was, "Oh that's such a good place to work and this and that," whatever, and I guess it was, I'd say monetarily. One of the better jobs we had here in Asheville. But what one had to go through to get that far was difficult, which you looked at quite differently being directly involved. 'Cause railroading is so--t goes so deep. There's so much involved in being a

railroader, because some people don't get second chances if they make a mistake. It could be fatal. And you just have to be alert, more or less, at all times. It's a good job for those who have alertness and stay on top of things because one mistake could be your last.

KV: Specifically, then, what as a brakeman-could you describe what a brakeman did? JH: A brakeman reports for duty at the Roundhouse, usually, he and the engineer. Then they proceed out to the track where the engines are kept and they-whatever power you were going to be using that day, you go out and you get those engines. And you look on the engines for your tools, your materials that you figure that's required for us to have before you leave the shop. You make that inspection to see that they are there, such as your knuckles, the airhoses, the tools, stuff like that. If something goes wrong and you've got to repair, you've got to have your tools to repair it with. And once you get your water and things like that, and you make sure you've got your fuses, and your flags if you're gonna be on a running section or extra because an extra uses white flags and you're running a section using green flags. You have to make sure you have all these materials before you leave the shop. And once you leave the shop, you go out into the yard and the Tower will tell you where your train-what track your train is. And this is where you go out and you back up and couple up to your train and once you get coupled and you make your brake test and this and that, you proceed to leave Asheville. But that's basically what a Brakeman's job is, and a Flagman's job now is basically the same thing, but you sometimes ride the rear end of the train when we had cabooses wherever the conductor designates you should ride and the tail end is the caboose. So all in all, I guess that's about the gist of a brakeman's job and maybe a flagman's job.

But the conductor, he's in charge of the train and all the employees on that train. And he makes the decisions and anything goes wrong, he's got the answers, tells the people as to why this wasn't done or that wasn't done-he'd be the first one to talk, I was promoted to that area. About 3-4 years after I was there, I was promoted to conductor. Like I say, you learn something from other people; you never know it all, you never know it all, because it's just so much involved. That's

why when a lot of people ask me, "Do you know so-and-so? They work on the railroad." I say, "What part?" 'Cause you've got the Track, you've got the Shop, you've got the Signal Crew. I mean you've got all aspects of areas where people could work on the train.

KV: I think someone told me you were the first African American conductor on the railroad.

JH: No, I wasn't the first. Like I say, there were 2 other people there before I got there; that was Curtis Seabrook was there-he was the oldest. And LH. Prince, he was the second. I was third.

KV: Did you have a regular run?

JH: Yeah, I used to have regular runs, especially when it came close to retiring, my regular run, more-or-less, was Asheville to Catawba, when we had a coal train that took coal down to Duke Power, and this was more-or-less one of the runs that I made. But before having a regular run, you just had to go wherever they told you to go, because you get regular runs by seniority. That just doesn't happen. That's over a period of time before you stand for a regular job.

Otherwise, you'd be on call after eight hours. So when you have a regular job, you know when you'd be going out.

We used to run from Asheville to Spencer, outside of Salisbury, and that's an over-night trip. I mean you go there today, and you come back the next day. And the same thing when you went to Charlotte. Now when you went to Spartanburg, which was a nice run, because you leave today and come back today. The Saluda grade, which was one of the steepest grades in the nation-when you go down Saluda Mountain, which was very steep, the run was good, but there wasn't a lot of room for error when you worked that side of the mountain. When you worked anywhere on the railroad here in Asheville, in mountainous terrain, anywhere you went, it was tough. If you had problems, especially going down Blue Ridge, when it's real cold, when you put the brakes on it might not go all the way through your train to the rear car. It could just freeze up.

KV: When you say it might not go all the way through the train, are you saying the brakes are connected to following cars?

JH: Right, you see, every car has its own pistons and brakes. And it, (like I said, the Brakeman has to couple up the train and make a brake test before you'd depart. You have to determine that you've got brakes throughout the train. So you put your brake on, and you've got a gauge on the caboose, and you can look up there and you've got 70 lbs to start with and it goes down to about 50, and you say, "Brakes 'coming on." And you can hear the brakes coming on and you can hear them release-the pistons go in. So you can tell when the brakes are on, you can tell when the brakes are off. Once the brakes are off on the caboose, the brakes are off on every car in that train.

KV: Thanks for explaining that. And when it's cold, you're saying —

JH: It can get so cold that you might have reduction on your brake pressure.

KV: When you were promoted to conductor, did the racist hassles decrease any, or did they simply change, or...?

JH: No, in some areas it might have changed because they knew that you were there. There was a lot of prejudice, I guess you might say, I mean an adjustment for everybody. Adjustment from the white perspective because they weren't accustomed to you or weren't accustomed to working with a Negro. They resented working for you, and being that they were familiar with the work that was to be done and you were not, they would sometimes take advantage of you by you doing sometimes too many jobs instead of just your job. But eventually you know, it had its I guess some good and some bad. Some might say, "I'm not putting up with all this kind of stuff." But I knew once I went out there, that I was going to be there. I told them when I got there that I wouldn't be run off the job. They wouldn't run me away from the job.

And trying to learn a system of stations, which we used to have in figures, like Asheville was 141. You'd see S 141 or S 111, S 100, S 98-all those towns. Places. Like S 54 was Hickory. And S111, Old Fort, S 79 Morganton, 380 Charlotte, 332 Spencer, I mean, but no one told you these things. You sort of had to grasp all these things on your own, because they were not really trying to help



you-which, when I became able to help others, I would a lot of times entertain those thoughts of treating them the way I was treated, but I did not do that. And, uh, I don't think anyone that I worked with could say that they weren't treated fairly.

KV: Oh, yeah, that would have been quite a temptation when you were training whites.

JH: Yes, because see, even some of those people got advances, some of those people got promotions went up faster than you did, when you trained them. But it wasn't much sense in doing a whole lot of complaining because it wasn't that many places to go to try to get any support. And that's just the way it was.

KV: You didn't have to face situations where, for instance, some white guy, hid one of your tools or something like that? because one of the things that might prevent them from doing that was knowing that they'd endanger the entire train then?

JH: Well, once you get called to go out, to be part of a crew on a train, that's what you are-part of that crew. So you don't try, basically, you don't try to hurt each other. You want to get this train on the road and get back. Everybody wants to make this a successful trip. But in getting from A to B, in-between that A to B, there's some kind-a lot of work being done between these points. And sometimes you'd get treated unjustly between those points, because sometimes you might do, uh, part of your other friend's job, because you aren't really, really up to date on where your whole job function is. So it's like when shoving cars onto a track, you got to ride the rear of that car and usually the other person will have you ride the rear to the stops because you got to have a man on the rear for this movement.. And once you stop, you get off the rear [of the car], you walk back toward the engine. Whereas sometimes the person you're working with isn't there to make that cut, once you stop at the rear, that means you've got to go make the cut [yourself],. Things like that. But when you got a good crew, it's beautiful to work, when everyone's working together.

KV: So there were times when you had a good crew.

JH: Oh sure, sure. And they were, at times there were people who're not giving you 100%. They don't like your question. Like from the Flagman. See, the Brakeman's the lowest person on the job at the time. 'Cause it's the Conductor, the Engineer, then the Flagman, then the Brakeman. So when you've got a good crew, it's like having good teamwork. And the way it is today, because I made a point when they decided to reduce crew sizes on trains, I didn't think it was safe. And I still don't, and you know... It's proven to be a little bit more dangerous just because you don't have the manpower you once had, You used to have four to five people on a train to represent a train crew. Now you have two men or three, and they want the same results as if you had the four or five. So the work is still there, but the manpower is reduced, which means somebody's doing more work.

KV: So some job might get shortchanged.

JH: Sure. See, we used to have a Brakeman and a Flagman on every job, on every job. You had a Conductor, a Flagman, a Brakeman, and an Engineer. That's four people. Sometimes you had a Fireman-that's five people. All right, now today sometimes you just have the Engineer and the Conductor. No Brakeman an Engineer, a Conductor and a Flagman. Anyway, that's it.

KV: When did they do the reduction?

JH: They did that in , hmm... I guess in '95 or '96, 'cause that's what really pushed me into retirement because I knew I was working on a crew-I had three men then. I was going to Spartanburg; that was my regular run then. And after they wanted to reduce you down to two-man crews, like when you take coal down to CP and L, y'know in Skyland, you knew who was going to be having to do all the work-walking and cutting and this and that. And it was difficult for me to walk as it was, my back problem. So I just knew that I wanted to have my operation when I was still on active duty. So after I had my back operation, I knew I wouldn't be able to go back.

KV: Oh really?

JH: Yeah. That's why I say it'd led to my retirement.

KV: So they reduced the crew even on that run that uses the Saluda Grade?

JH: Ev-er-y-thing. Every crew. Reduced crew.

KV: In the intervening years before they reduced crews, did the percentages of African Americans in the crews ever improve?

JH: Well, I can't say. I can say that when you're prejudiced, you're still gonna' have prejudice. You just don't change just because you go on duty. What you are you are. You just have to accept we gotta' work together; we've gotta' get this train on the road. That's it. That's all there is to it. We can get on in a harmonious way, or we can bicker. But it's better to work together than to work separately or against one another or trying to connive and put all the work on another employee or something like that. Because when I'd had a trainee, sometimes I'd inform them of what they're supposed to do and I'd tell them, "Any time you set off cars, you've got to apply brakes to the cars that you set off, secure them." And they'd stand around as if they didn't know what to do, and I'd say, "Look, what'd I just tell you? Any time you set off cars, you've got to put up a sufficient number of hand brakes."

Sometimes new employees would try to play dumb and say, "Oh, yeah!" .. you'd find some very conscientious ones, and sometimes you'd find just the opposite. But it's up to you to say, "Look, I'm not going to tell you anymore. Cause when I come in off the run, I can make a statement to some official as to how you're performing." Cause they're always going to be asking . "How're you doing? And how's he doing?" You can't let him get hurt, 'cause if they get hurt, that's a reflection on you. And here you are, y'know, like I used to ask the officials sometimes, "Just what have you all done before you all send them to us? What have you done to prepare them?" Y'know. Don't unload all this on us. 'Cause if they get hurt on the job, that's the first thing they tell you: "Do not let him get hurt. Watch him. Watch him. Watch him." So a lot of times, you'll be working, and you'll sometimes do some things yourself and then you tell him what you did. But if you've got a time factor; you don't have a lot of time to just sit there and try to go over each thing, each time you're getting ready to do it. Because a lot of times, when we're picking up cars, setting off and picking up cars, we make our plan before we get to that point. And we tell each other what we're going to do, so he knows what's going on. And if you don't call attention, whereas when it

comes your turn to do what you're supposed to do and you don't know what's going on, because you didn't pay attention, then you just make it bad for the whole crew.

KV: And who knows how many people you're endangering on the way.

JH: Oh sure. When you're doing well, it shows up, and when you're not, it shows up. You make some good, strong relationships out there.

And I had ... a Flagman with me; and when you had the regular crew, hey, that's what's happening. Yep. A lot of times you don't feel up to, say, going to work,' but cause you know you've got your regular crew you can make it; you can deal with it, you know. Yeah, pick up the slack for each other. Yeah, I admit I had some good crews, very good crews.

KV: I understand that you've been involved with trying to improve relations between the Asheville Police Dept. and the African American community.

JH: Yeah, yeah. I got involved in some of that in the 1970's, 74, 75.

KV: It goes back that far?

JH: Well, an incident, well, [more than one] had happened, and I guess a lot of people didn't feel they were getting true representation, if you want'a put it that way, from the Police Dept. and others, because they seemed to just brush over things, instead of really looking into the matter. Things were a little different then because they had a Civil Service Board, and today, I think that's changed, and they now go to [an internal investigator within the APD. If it goes to the SBI or Ron Moore, they don't share their findings.] But then, the Civil Service Board found the unjust situations from like a shooting or killing or this and that or beating of individuals, and all this kind of stuff. And see I think they call it something else. Now I'm not exactly sure when that changed, but that's what we were up against, back in the 70's, because we were asking for a lot of changes to be made and for a lot of promotions as far as Blacks being promoted because they were not key people in the Department. They were not getting promotions from the minority side of things at all. And basically it was sort of the same way it is today. Very much the same, because I've attended a few meetings they're having presently, and they're discussing the same things we used to talk about

then. And some of these things we discussed back then, which were supposed to have been implemented, we were supposed to monitor, we were supposed to check on these things every so often, every quarter, or whatever, to see if they would be in compliance with what we'd agreed to.

KV: And this would be particularly in terms of use of force?

JH: Yes, yes. Because see at that time, I know I made a request that any officer who had x amounts of arrests and each form indicated that they had to show that they had resisted and all this, then they should be called in and talked to by the supervisor, because this "resisting arrest" is just a thing they use to cover themselves for misusing or beating on another person. And basically that's some of the same stuff that they're talking about today. And some of that, some of the people they're shooting and then not really following things up, and once you start questioning them about it, they say, "Well, it's out of our hands. It's gone to so and so and so, and to Ron Moore." And once it goes to Ron Moore, you can't touch it. You can't even ask anything more about it. And everything you hear about it is just speculation. You know. "Well, I heard this, and I heard that." That doesn't amount to anything. But that's basically how things are.

KV: And when you were pressuring, ... did they use the rationale, "We can't give you information that would be in a person's Personnel File"?

JH: Hmm, well, at that time, they were close-chested, closed with a lot of information like that. I mean, the information we were trying to do was more-or-less to let the police officers know that they have to treat people of all colors the same. I mean, just treat them fairly. And it's just that you still had your rights, but they had to be respectful when making an arrest and all this kind of stuff to you, because you're still a human being, you still have your rights. But some people feel that they don't have any rights whatsoever-some of the police officers-because I used to ask them when we were asking about policies and procedures at the Police Dept, they didn't really have a whole lot in place at the time. They said, one of the officers, Truelove I believe it was, was writing out a manual at the time for this and that. It tells what officers were supposed to do in certain type situations and all this, you know. And at the end of the day, if you had to fire your

weapon, you had to account for that bullet that was used, and why you had to use it and this and that. I don't know if they're doing it today. But back at that time [it was to be] in the manual.

This is one of the meetings we had on May 25th, of 1976, and this was Community Relations Services, U.S. Dept. of Justice. And these are the two people who worked at the Dept. of Justice-Leon Burruss and Fred Crawford.  
KV: White or Black?

JH: Black. All right. And we were meeting at the Asheville Chamber of Commerce Bldg., and the scheduled time was at 9:30 in the morning, and we started at 10:45. And they definitely indicate that the Coalition was late in arriving. And the people representing the city was Bill Moore, who was the attorney for Asheville Police, Ken Michalove who was I guess City Mgr., Sam Green, who was working in the office some place, and Chief Hall of the Asheville Police Dept. Mike Smith, Tom Posey with Civil Service. And then the Coalition group was Miss Rose Hawkins, Carl Johnson, James Harrison, Rev. Toms-Rev. O.T. Toms, and Mr. Les Goodley. And the observers were Lonnie Gilliam from the Human Relations Dept. and Betty Hendry of the League of Women Voters, Dr. Pritchard, League of Women Voters. And these were some of the things we had agreed to.

KV: And these would be written into the Policy Manual?

JH: Supposed to.

KV: And you never saw the final copy of the Policy Manual as to whether or not... .

JH: they were compliant? No, never did. because we did not discuss this again. We had another different mayor. And I had mentioned that one time what was supposed to have been implemented, but there was another Council, another mayor. So that's still required. I don't care. The change doesn't make it.... What's supposed to be on the books is supposed to be on the books.

KV: This first amendment is calling for a program that the city would develop that would result in the recruitment, hiring training, promotion of minorities and women in both the APD and the Fire Dept.

JH: Um hum.

KV: And the program was supposed to be ready in 20 working days. And it's still an issue.

JH: Yep.

KV: The business about the agreement that the complaining citizen should be notified within ten days within filing the complaint of the investigation, I do believe that was written into the Policy Manual, but they're not following it.

JH: Nobody's aware of what's supposed to be going on, and nobody's questioning it. They just give you any kind of response. KV: Was there a route for filing a complaint?

JH: Well, the way we said then, when filing a complaint, if we had evidence of someone to the existing complaint procedures, we'd be following up. KV: I wonder how many people are even aware of this? JH: I don't have any idea.

KV: I think it's a small percentage of the Asheville population, because we ran into ignorance of the complaint procedure, or even of the fact that a person could when we were working on this about four years ago [prior to the hiring of Chief Hogan]. And there is still no complaint form available in the lobby of Headquarters [as of Nov. 2007]. The only complaint form available is on their web site.

JH: [Our Coalition said then that] there should be added to the existing discipline and review procedure of Asheville Police Dept. complaint procedure a procedure for making complaints.

KV: The members of the Concerned Citizens Committee were members of the African American community?

JH: Right, right, right. See, 24 July, 1976; this earlier meeting was May, 1976.

KV: And you actually got city officials to sign onto this?

JH: Yes. There's Chief Hall, Kenneth Michalove.

KV: And the Chief of the Fire Dept.,...

JH: This [other] is the Civil Service Rules.

Dec. 18,2007

Home of James Harrison

JH: [Looking at some documents from the 70's involving law enforcement and civil rights:] Now if I'm not mistaken, this [article] the beginning of an incident that happened here in Asheville that caused a lot of people to get together. Let's just say it caused a big reaction here in the city. And it reads "Police Brutality Charged," written by Jody Meacham, a Citizen-Times staff writer at the time. It reads as follows:

"About sixty persons, mostly Black, presented City Council with a statement Thurs. protesting what they consider a history of police brutality on the part of the Asheville Police Dept. This statement was drafted Wed. night at a meeting and is apparently another outgrowth of the August 2nd arrest of a 16-year-old Black youth Louis Reed, who was [charged with] damage to property, resisting arrest, and assaulting a police officer. Now the Rev. Fred D. Taylor of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference., SCLC in Atlanta, told Council that his organization is investigating allegations of police brutality in the city. Asked by Mayor Richard A. Wood, Jr., if he had any specific recommendations at this point in the SCLC investigation, Taylor urged that a panel independent of the Police Dept. and the City be established to check on police conduct. The Reed arrest, which included the spraying of the chemical Mace in the face of the youth's 14-year-old sister, was investigated by the Asheville Buncombe Community Relations Council (CRC) and resulted in the five-day suspension of one of the six officers involved in the arrest. But Taylor said the CRC was not an unbiased group because the bottom line of the Community Council is that it gets money from the city of Asheville and the county of Buncombe.

"A series of speakers following Taylor all made additional suggestions, many of them exactly paralleling items in a list of 16 requests made to Council two weeks ago by the Fraternal Order of Police when they demanded a 25% raise. Both the Police and Thursday's speakers asked for additional supervision, more intense training, and a manual of rules and procedures. The disparity in



these suggestions was on the aspect of investigation of allegations of misconduct, instead of Taylor's idea of an independent investigatory panel, the Police asked to be allowed to investigate themselves, and they specifically asked that the Community Relations Council not be allowed to investigate officers. Taylor hinted and others specifically stated that recent incidents of alleged incidents of police brutality in this City were caused by racism on the part of white officers directed against Black suspects. Councilman R. Morris said that 'Our police officers are a dedicated group and are trying hard and I think these things will work themselves out.' The group's statement was ordered made part of Council's minutes by Wood, but no action was taken by Council. Wood said Council is open to suggestions from others and commends any group for any suggestions to solve any problems in our community,"

That's the end of the article on that particular aspect.

[Other documents, including the one above, are photocopied and in Mr. Harrison's file.]

The purpose of this interview was to learn about Mr. Harrison's family's experience with Urban Renewal and his own experience with integrating the Norfolk and Southern Railroad Co that was a major employer in Asheville. Up until the 1960's, however, it had segregated African American workers from the jobs with the best possibilities of upward movement.; those were reserved for whites

What this transcription does not indicate, unfortunately is the gentle yet strong character of this man, his generosity with his time-being a long time, very active member of Hopkins Chapel and a Sunday School teacher and registering voters, in addition to his efforts on behalf of African Americans to implement reforms in the Asheville Police Department. He is loyal to his family-taking care of his mother (she moved in with him when having knee surgery) and goes to the nursing home where his sister has been to feed her lunch and dinner every day of the week for years. It only begins to hint at his pride in his children. And he's still keeping tabs on members of his community. These things only came out

while the tape recorder was shut off or from one of his friends (James Green), with whom he attended Stephens-Lee H.S. It has been a privilege to make his acquaintance.

James Harrison

Dec. 18,2007

Documents pertaining to Concerned Citizens' efforts on behalf of the African American community:

Document. 1: Community Council/Concerned Citizens (name of group organized to represent the African American community to take its grievances to City Administration) had gone to City Council with list of 12 demands, first of which was dismissal of police chief. Also the statement of demands points out absence of African Americans in upper ranks of APD, among other demands. Others include an improved complaint process for citizens to use in regards to APD and a system to monitor officers' number of resisting arrest and/or similar charges, the type that officers use to account for their own use of force.

Document. 1 A: 'An Act to Establish a Department of Civil Service ...'

Document. 2: Asheville Citizen article. This article is the one at the beginning of the transcript for this date:

"Police Brutality Charged" Reports that African American community (60) met to draft statement to City Council about police, brutality that occurred during arrest of an AA male (16 years old) and history of police brutality. A representative of the Southern Christian Leadership Council was present. Police Dept. wants to be allowed to investigate itself.

Document. 3: "Police Brutality" - Report of meeting on Sept. 24,1975.

Document, 4. "Council Hearing Set on Brutality Claim" from Asheville Citizen . Oct. 10,1975.

Document. 5: Dated 1/14/75, "We The Committee of Concerned Citizens believe that the Council Members,..." This details recommended steps to becoming a

police officer as well as other demands for APD improvements to address its racism.

Document. 5A, AsheviHe Citizen article, 10/3/75: "'Brutality' Charges on Agenda."

Document. 6: Handwritten notes of James Harrison in regards to points he would make at meetings of Concerned Citizens.

Document. 7: a collection, including Notes from 1 st mediation meeting with representatives from City of Asheville to address the series of demands outlined in Document. 1. This, the first of three mediations, is dated May 25, 1976. This document includes the agreements reached. Last page of part one of Document. 7 is page of signatures attesting to the agreement, which includes various city administrators and Chief of Police and Chief of Fire Dept, signed July 20, 1976.

Second part of Document. 7 is copy of a memo from Kenneth Michalove, Acting City Manager, to Dept. heads and members of Concerned Citizens who had negotiated the above agreement. Dated 3/31/77, this refers to the "attached agreement" and calls for a meeting "to review the status of the agreement and to discuss any related subjects of mutual interest." The "attached agreement" is the first part of Document. 7.

Document. 8: City of Asheville memo to Dept. and Div. heads re: Personnel Relations.

Document. 9: "City Employes Complain About Bosses at Meeting." Asheville Citizen 2/12/76.

Document. 9a: "Asheville Police Officers Get Long-Needed Manual," in AsheviHe Citizen, 1/29/76.

Document. 10: "Council OKs Race Advisory Committee," Asheville Citizen.  
3/5/76.

Doc.11: "School Board Told Discrimination." n.d.. Article from Asheville Citizen.

Document. 11 a: "City School Board Notes Grievances." Asheville Citizen.  
1/6/76. Document. 11b: "Police Criticized in Civil Service Commission Meet."  
Asheville Citizen. 1/8/76.

Document. 12: "Psychological Testing Approved for Potential Officers" Asheville  
Citizen. 11/6/75.

Document. 12a: Editorial from Asheville Citizen: "Screening Police Officers."  
11/10/75.

Document. 13: "City Police Vote to End Five-Day Slowdown. Firemen Threat  
Remains." Asheville Citizen. 11 /5/75

Document. 14: Collection of news articles from Asheville Citizen: "Stripped of  
Duties. Water Chief Under Probe," 2/14/76. "J.C. Hall to Lead Enforcement  
Talks," 10/19/76.