

## **Jesse ray Sr.**

### **Side 1:**

He was born in Spartanburg, May 11, 1911, moved to Asheville at 4 months and has lived here ever since. He attended the old Hill Street School and graduated from Stephens-Lee in 1929. He attended the University of Chicago for a short time and graduated from the Worsham College of Mortuary Science [Wheeling, Illinois] in 1932.

[16] Following WWII he was sent on the repatriation program where he supervised disinterring the remains of American servicemen in England, Holland, Belgium and France. The bodies were placed in sealed metal caskets, and at the request of the families, were either returned to the U.S. or reburied in permanent cemeteries abroad.

[25] He opened business in 1936 on Eagle Street with a partner but in 1938 moved to 267 College St., working alone. [Gaither Henry]

[33] In 1951 he bought his present building which had been a black hospital. The hospital merged with Memorial Mission. (see Mary Hyde enclosures) [Dr. R. H. Bryant]

[48] There was also a black hospital on Clingman Avenue [Blue Ridge Hospital, 18 Clingman Ave.] which was later used as a rooming house.

[62] His parents had 13 children. One was killed in an automobile accident. Three girls and six boys lived to adulthood (photo of mother enclosed). All girls became teachers - one an assistant principal. A brother retired as a teacher and one worked for United Air Lines. He has 4 children:

Wilma is vice president of Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan.

Jesse Ray Jr. is manager of Skyland CPL, also working with city redevelopment (see photo) and in his father's business (see file).

George works with IBM in N.Y.

Charles works with U.S. Air in Raleigh

[Jesse Ray Jr., Wilma Ray, George Ray, Charles Ray]

[111] In 1979 he was appointed by the Mayor to be a commissioner on the redevelopment project. He was made chairman and recommended other blacks since most projects were black (see enclosure: report dedicated to him).

[124] He lists housing projects that were all black and are now integrated: Hillcrest [integration not going well I hear - in 1992 some whites were moved in, but blacks forced them out] Lee-Walker Heights (see Dorothy Jackson tape), Pisgah View, Klondike, Livingston. The houses on the South Side were deteriorated. The redevelopment project bought up the buildings and built new ones. [The one I visited in Lee-Walker Heights was well designed, in good taste and most desirable.]

[143] At one time Montford was mainly an elite area. The large houses because of age and repair cause problems (see Mathews tape).

[150] He was given an award in Washington (in photo on wall behind him in his office) for a program whereby a person could buy a lot for \$1 and receive assistance in building a house.

[156] When he started business he borrowed money - people trusted him but some thought he was crazy to take such a chance. He had competition in the area.

[166] His mother showed him a picture of a beautiful young woman in the Pittsburgh Courier, a nationally circulated newspaper for blacks. The picture was on the front page. She was attending college. He decided to write to her [I saw the newspaper and an oil painting done of her after they were married - beauty]. They were married in 1935 and he was earning \$17 a week. She has recently served for 8 years as a trustee of UNCA, appointed by the Governor. [Julia Ray]

[183] Jesse Jr. is a trustee at UNCA. Charles played football for four years at NC State in Raleigh. [Jesse Ray Jr., Charles Ray]

[195] There were many businesses on Eagle and Market Streets in the 20's. [He gave me a list of businesses in this area but there are no dates. I do not believe any are still active - however Milton Ready indicated that, because of financing and competition with white stores, the turn over is constant - see his tape].

[198] He went to Hill Street School. There were no auditoriums in any of the black schools, so students walked to the YMI for concerts and year-end programs. He attended summer camp at Pisgah in an area called Sandy Bottom.

[214] He has been interested in the YMI for years and is a contributor. He is Vice President of the Board of Trustees. The main meeting room was named the Jesse and Julia Ray room. The building was condemned when a branch of the YMCA moved to a building on Ashland. It stayed vacant until the city bonds brought it up to standards (\$500,000 through city). The YMI is working with Pack Place and is searching for a new director right now. [Wanda Henry-Coleman resigned - hope to find out more later] A unique African Museum holds artifacts. [Margaret Fuller]

He tells of an African family whose son attended Asheville School for Boys and stayed with the Rays on holidays when he couldn't return to Gambia. He is now with the United Nations in New York. His father was a medical doctor, at that time head of the World Health Service in the Congo. {Solha Mahoney, Dr. John Mahoney}

His wife has a number of pieces of African art given by a visiting professor at Spellman University in Atlanta (the mother of the Gambian student). Their house is full of African pieces from their travels. [Julia Ray, Dr. Florence Mahoney]

[292] Through the Friendship Force, his wife visited Holland and stayed with a family in Germany. The couple later came to visit the Rays in Asheville.

[337] He was in Holland for a long time - there were 29,000 soldiers to be identified. Belgium had the greatest number of unknown. [He was asked to return but his wife, who had to run the

business with the help of a hired mortician, said he could go any place as long as he was home at night!]

[430] There was a cemetery for blacks in Kenilworth which was used until after WWII. There is no map and it is now closed. He has relatives buried there. Johnny is doing research on it. It is West of Harvest House - a few stones remain, but it is mostly wilderness. [Johnny Baxter]

[497] Riverside Cemetery has opened up more space. Sunset on South Side (out 25A) and Violet Hill in West Asheville are all black cemeteries. Some cemeteries were established before the State made the regulation that they must be perpetually cared for. Newton cemetery no longer taking bodies (see Schell tape).

[558] Changes in funeral services is discussed. He practiced for 50 years before his first cremation. Cremations cost \$780 whereas the average price for a traditional burial is \$3,800.

[583] His son was one of the first blacks to integrate Newton School - this was six years after the law passed. There were 5 blacks in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. [George Ray]

## **Side 2:**

[2/1] When the family was living on the second floor of the Funeral Home, his son was told to attend a school on Livingston Street whereas the Whites living across the street were assigned to go to the Newton School which was much closer. Ray and four other black parents in Kenilworth protested to the School Board. Ray went to Washington with a white pastor from Calvary Presbyterian Church and the chairman of the Asheville School Board. They were told that the school must be integrated. He mentions no difficulty. His son became president of the student bodies of both Newton School and David Millard Junior High School. The Rays were active members of the PTA. [George Ray, Reverend Jones]

When George Ray went to Chapel Hill he thought there wouldn't be as many demonstrations as there were in Asheville. An allotment for outside speakers given by the school administration (\$30-40,000 for whites and \$3,000 for blacks) made for inequality, and when David Duke, a nationally known Klansman was scheduled, the black students sat outside the President's House. Money was raised and Mohammed Ali flew in a private plane to address a group and sign his books. George asked his father to bring his limousine to meet Ali at the airport, take him to the book store for signing for 2 hours and then to the hotel until time to speak. He said the speech was good - about equality. [David Duke, Mohammed Ali]

[2/89] His daughter, at Oakland University says there are still racial problems and they seem to be getting worse. Of the 13,000 students only 125 are black. He feels the present recession may be a factor. [Wilma Ray Bledsoe]

[2/101] He had hoped for a lot better. There is still not equality in jobs and opportunities for blacks.

[2/108] In the past black teachers knew their students and contacted parents when there were problems. There aren't as many black teachers now - this is partially due to the closing of black schools and retirement without replacement. A suit for "salary equalization" for teachers was won in Asheville. [Herbert Marshall, Huston Hill]

[2/144] At one time black students studied to become teachers, doctors, lawyers, and (a few) chemists. His cousin, in the 20's, graduated as an engineer, and, being unable to get a job, went back and studied business administration.

[2/152] He has been helping students financially for years. He sends checks personally rather than go through foundations or tax deductible routes.

[2/172] He feels that UNCA is encouraging black students. The staff is well integrated.

[2/182] His father worked in the railroad round house - blacks were not allowed to work on the train though a few got to be firemen. They were not allowed in the unions, so when there was a strike, the 8 blacks in his father's group did not strike. The strikers were angry and black houses had to be guarded. Laborers got 30 cents an hour. He earned \$37.50 a week and died age 55, 59 years ago. (see Lucius Craggy Ingle) His mother couldn't work. Some of the children stayed with family members. The older children helped the younger ones. He got some money, went to Chicago and worked his way through school.

[2/239] He discusses diseases in the city - there were black and white sanitariums.

[2/244] The Depression devastated the city - no work - no welfare. His family moved several times and bought a house for \$1,250. There was no electrical lighting.

[2/273] His mother made dresses for the girls and shirts for the boys. The children were barefoot in the summer.

[2/288] At one time the city had the best water in the area. It became polluted in the 50's and the passenger trains wouldn't take it.

[2/301] Passenger trains became unprofitable. Everyone used to travel this way. He used to take his children on Pullman rides by having someone else get tickets. If a bellman from a hotel got them it was assumed they were for white guests.

[2/329] He tells about his activities in helping people obtaining benefits available to them - fuel, Medicaid, etc. - and describes the project housing.

[2/365] Before integration bellman, waiters, bar tenders were all black. Now those jobs are largely lost to the blacks.

[2/380] His son Jesse Jr. was active in the Woolworth "sit ins." Water fountains and toilets were segregated. There were no toilets for blacks underground in Pack Square. They had to go to Eagle Street. (see Marjorie Lockwood). [Jesse Ray Jr.]

[2/464] During his two years in Europe reburying soldiers, his wife ran the business with the help of a graduate from Mortician school in Philadelphia.

[2/473] Changes in the business and customs relating to death are discussed. Funeral Homes are now called Establishments. A complete funeral cost \$60, whereas the average funeral today costs about \$3,800. A Cadillac hearse cost \$4,950 and today costs \$55,000. Men used to wear mourning bands sewn to their coat sleeve and women wore black for a year. A black wreath was placed on the door of the house where someone had died. [We did not discuss on tape, but later I learned there are many aspects of the business that need special licensing and certificates - even though he is semi-retired and wants to remove himself - he is the only one with all the paper work ability. I didn't ask but believe he had some sort of insurance policies available to cover expenses.]

[2/515] He has been involved with Hospice and a member of his family died in their facility (see Dr. Michael Keleher tape).

[2/527] Today ceremonies are more calm with less outward show (see enclosed Xerox). In the past secret organizations would parade and a police escort would usually assist if requested. Churches organize dinner for out of town guests.