

THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT
BIRMINGHAM IN THE 1960'S

BY

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HISTORY 442
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MARCH, 22, 1995

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At the turn of the century the South became infected with a social disease known as Jim Crow. This was an affliction of the mind not the body therefore a cure did not occur overnight. It took many years for those infected to recognize they had a problem and it wasn't until much later before the problem was diagnosed and treated. The treatment for everyone was painful and often deadly. Jim Crow was a segregated social system designed to suppress the Black Race and promote white supremacy. In the 1960's a movement began to eliminate Jim Crow. The history that follows highlights certain events that occurred in Birmingham, Alabama with the personal memories of a woman named Clarisse Hardy.

The first memory spoken of by Mrs. Hardy, an attractive black woman in her forty's, was public transportation in Birmingham. She recalls her mother teaching her to quietly pay and move to the back of the bus.¹ Birmingham in 1963 was a segregation stronghold in the South.² It was unlawful for blacks to occupy any space designated for whites. This segregation of public transportation was first challenged by Rosa Parks early in the decade. When she refused to give up her rightful seat in the black section of a public bus to a white man, a confrontation took place that is now a historic event.³ Historians make this moment of challenge the beginning of the Civil Rights movement. J. S. Blake, the driver of the bus, who tried to enforce the segregation law, and Mrs. Parks, experienced a challenge to the value system that had been passed

down to them. Symbolically protecting his white race from disrespect, Mr. Blake called the police. Symbolically standing up for the value of her Black Race, Mrs. Parks kept her seat. Clearly the battle line was drawn.⁴

As the Civil Rights movement grew, a peaceful type of demonstration became common. It was called a "sit in". The first one occurred in North Carolina at a variety store. Blacks boldly ignored the signs and the understood and written law and sat down at a white lunch counter.⁵ To demonstrate the unfairness of segregation "sit ins" spread throughout the south.⁶ An example of this occurred at Newberrys in downtown Birmingham which had a segregated lunch counter. Blacks were required to purchase their lunch and then stand up to eat it.⁷ "Sit ins" also occurred at Lovemans, Pizitz, Woolworth's and Kress Department Stores. Reverend Fred L. Shuttleworth was the movement leader in Birmingham. He planned "sit ins" carefully and systematically for effect. Since the demonstrators would be immediately arrested, careful planning was required to keep from alerting police.⁸ Police commissioner, Bull Conner, met this challenge head on and declared on the front page of the Birmingham News "All citizens, white & negro, be notified that the City of Birmingham will not tolerate activity on the part of anyone or group that will breach the peace or infringe on the rights of others." After several incidents Bull Connor became synonymous with Civil Rights resistance.⁹

Martin Luther King, Jr. became the movement leader in 1961 and after a small success in Georgia decided to come to Alabama. ¹⁰

Birmingham was the target for demonstrations partly because of the nicknames it had acquired from reaction to Rev. Shuttlesworth's activities. Birmingham became known as "the most segregated city in America".¹¹ King's aid comments "Birmingham was perfect for the confrontation needed to further the cause. What was desired was dramatization and they knew Bull Connor would provide that and more." King's movement was known as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLS) and they felt if Birmingham could be reformed then any other city would listen.¹² This attitude resulted from the attack of the Freedom Riders in Anniston, Alabama. This was a non-violent, direct action test of Alabama's segregation laws in public transportation. The test was passed with hatred and violence, clearly stating a need for reform.¹³

Martin Luther King, Jr. and his wife, Coretta Scott King, based their movement on the philosophy of non violent resistance.¹⁴ The method involved strikes, sit ins, boycotts, fasts, and civil disobedience.¹⁵ He was able to effectively unify southern blacks by establishing a congregational following from African-American churches. He preached a strong faith in Christ which morally justified their peaceful fight for freedom.¹⁶ The freedom meetings were religious affairs mixed with social and activist events. Described by Clarisse Hardy when she was a teenager,

"We would have a singing and we would pray and Martin Luther King would come and give this speech about what is going to change and what is going to happen and we are going to be treated as we are humans. Most of the meeting was more like a church meeting, you know, like all the black people gather there for meetings and we

would have the singing and the prayer and ... then we would plan what we were going to boycott or what date we were going to do a certain thing, everything was planned out, we just didn't jump up to do it"¹⁷

Demonstrations occurred frequently in the 60's in Birmingham. The reason they were so effective is due to the media coverage of the brutality of the police commissioner, Bull Connor.¹⁸ Mrs. Hardy recalls Connor's harshness when he boarded a county bus that was taking a her and a group of blacks, including children, to jail for attending a white church:

"Ya'll nigers are gonna hafta to shut up."¹⁹

Connors became the target for Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights movement because he was such an avid segregationist.

Marches in Birmingham at first were not met with violence. But when King led "Project C" (C for confrontation) Connors reacted with a show of force. He used police dogs and big water hoses to disperse the demonstrators. Women and children were injured and rioting resulted. Ironically it was a fight for peace.²⁰ Television coverage drew national attention resulting in more support for the movement. The brutality against the peaceful demonstrators initiated a response from the Kennedy administration to act on reforms.²¹ Kennedy had previously shown sympathy for their cause when he phoned, King's wife, Coretta, in concern and support for King when he was jailed for a sit in.²²

The racial tension in Birmingham worsened with more marches and bombings occurred in retaliation to these marches. But still the movement continued.

King encouraged black students to participate in the peaceful marches. When parents expressed concern for the safety of their children he responded "They had already been subjected to brutality by living in the southern way of life."²³ Children played an important role and were very effective in the movement.²⁴ Mrs. Hardy described how she participated in the marches in her parent's place because they were afraid of loosing their jobs if they did. She tells how she was jailed twice but kept "singing".²⁵ Persistent, the marchers remained non-violent and did not turn back. King comments

"The moral conscience of the nation was deeply stirred and all over the country our fight became the fight of decent American of all races."

The goal of creating a "tense racial environment" in Birmingham had been reached in 1965 and had swayed public opinion.²⁶ It is interesting to note that much of Birmingham middle class blacks did not participate. Also, many of the lower class blacks had lived in suppression and poverty so long, the movement was fearsome and to most, hopeless.²⁷

Black protesters wanted the Birmingham Code, Section 850, to be removed from law. This code provided for segregation in public places. Rev. Fred L. Shuttlesworth, a black leader in Birmingham, took it to court and sued the city as he frequently did, and the city, officials reacted negatively.²⁸ When it was ruled unconstitutional, Bull Connor and the mayor threatened to close the facilities rather than comply. This is exactly what happened. Parks were closed and moneys were not appropriated for operation or improvement. The city became divided on

the issue and compromises were initiated.²⁹

Tired of violence, damage to businesses, and embarrassing media coverage, an agreement was reached between white business leaders and the SCLC. Discrimination in their businesses would be corrected within 90 days. Demonstrations stopped but the violence continued with bombings of property and murder attempts.³⁰

Both leaders of this era were assassinated.³¹ Martin Luther King, Jr. and President John Kennedy. The effects of these occurrences were felt in both the black and white community and added to the heartache and turmoil of the time. Clarisse Hardy remembers the pain of such a loss being the same for both men whom she felt were fighting for the rights of black people.³² It caused chaos in black communities and rioting resulted in more deaths. But, this tumultuous time passed and the passing of the Civil Rights Acts and voting acts improved the future for blacks.³³

Clarisse Hardy expresses her gratitude for the change the Civil Rights movement brought in the life of her son. She says the discrimination she experienced as a child is not imposed on her son and it is difficult for him to imagine what it was like.³⁴ For those who fought and believed in freedom, it must be satisfying to know they were successful and their children can reap the benefits.

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We CLARESSIE B. HARDY and Patti Brooks
(Interviewee, print) (Interviewer, print)

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Claressie B. Hardy
(Interviewee's signature)

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B'HAM, ALA. 35212
Phone 841-3813

Claressie B. H. Patti Brooks
(Interviewer's signature)

Address 169 James Street Date 3/18/95
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Phone (205) 467-2156

Interviewee Background Information

Name: Claressie B. Hardy
Address: 1034 Easten Manor Drive
Phone Number(s): 84-3813
Approximate age or date of birth: 5-29-49
Mother's name: EVA Berry
Father's name: Robert Berry
Places lived and when: B'ham - All my life.

Education: A.S. Degree in Business Administration, 2 yrs College at Samford University in Paralegal

Religion: Baptist

Business, political and social memberships (past and present): Accounting Honor Society; 1000 Black Women Assn. NAACP

Present occupation: Phlebotomy tech

Former occupation(s): Phlebotomy tech

Special skills: Computer, Typing, Shorthand

Major Accomplishments: _____

Local events in which you have participated: _____

State and/or regional events in which you have participated: _____

National events in which you have participated: _____

International events in which you have participated: _____

Natural born U.S. citizen? Yes/No

Naturalized Citizen: Yes/No Date: Yes

Country from which you emigrated: _____

Documents, photographs, and artifacts which are in your possession: _____

Individuals you recommend who might be candidates for an oral history interview: EVA Berry

Additional information: _____

Clarisse Hardy

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6. Did you know he won a Nobel Peace Prize?
7. What was he like?
8. Did you know anyone who disapproved of him?
9. Did you know anyone sympathetic to the Black Panthers?

CHRONOLOGY FOR INTERVIEW

1960

- Police arrest 100 black protesters as "sit ins" spread throughout the South.

1961

- Segregationist mob attacks Freedom Riders when they try to integrate Alabama bus stations.

1963

- Birmingham's police force uses high powered water hoses and dogs against black demonstrators.
- Martin Luther King, Jr., is arrested after marches in Birmingham.
- Black rioting occurs in Birmingham
- President Kennedy is assassinated.

1964

- Civil Rights Act of 1964 is passed by Congress.

1968

- Martin Luther King, Jr. is assassinated in Memphis