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Race Relations in Owensboro During the 1960's

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The 1960's was a period that was filled with turmoil and change in American history. The Vietnam War, popular music, economics, foreign relations, the struggle against growing poverty, and the fight for equal rights by women all brought change to society that is still being felt today. However, the fight by blacks to earn their civil rights may have most changed the face of American society. Desegregation in education, public housing, public institutions, employment, and government has forever altered the course of American history. These changes were felt in Owensboro, but not to the radical or violent extent that people generally expect when considering the struggle for civil rights.

As America entered the 1960's, blacks and whites held strictly defined roles in society, but progress had been made in several key areas. This was evidenced with the Supreme Court's rulings on segregation in schools with *Brown vs Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* in 1954-55, the Interstate Commerce Commission's banning of segregation on interstate travel in November, 1955, and the Supreme Court's subsequent affirmation of the ICC's ban on bus segregation in November, 1956.(1) Many northern areas were desegregated or working towards it, but in the South, segregation was still common practice.

Owensboro, with its central location geographically, possessed aspects of both the North and the South in its race relations as the 1960's opened. Similar to the North, blacks and whites were able to live and work in close proximity so far as certain common courtesies were observed. In the South, there was little mingling of blacks and whites. However, like the South, certain jobs were held by whites only, many schools were still segregated, certain housing areas were segregated, as were several public institutions, and local government was slow to accept blacks within its ranks. This ambiguity is reflected in the ambivalent attitude observed in Owensboro regarding the move towards integration.

Owensboro experienced a smooth transition to integration when compared to other cities and counties across the country. Following the *Brown* decision, Owensboro schools moved to integrate. A biracial task force was formed in 1955 in order to determine the course of action to be followed regarding integration.(2) High schools began to integrate in 1956, while junior high and elementary schools began the following year.

In 1955, Owensboro had three high schools: Owensboro Senior High and Owensboro Technical High was an all-black school. A "Reconciliation of Integration" was passed

unanimously on August 29, 1955 by the Owensboro Board of Education. This allowed tenth through twelfth graders at Western High School to attend any other class at either of the two high schools that wasn't offered at Western. By 1960, a handful of black students had attended foreign language or R.O.T.C. classes offered at Senior High School.(3)

Owensboro took a more tolerant stance towards integration than many American cities. In 1957, black high school students had to be protected by the National Guard when attending all-white Central High School. The first black student at the University of Alabama was confronted directly by Alabama Governor George Wallace in 1963.(4) In Owensboro, little protest was made to the idea of desegregating schools. The most violent incident occurred when a cross was burned in an Owensboro school yard in 1960.(5) Some prejudice was encountered among the students, but curiosity and distrust was more prevalent. Many of the students had never interacted with students of another race before and were uneasy due to the lack of experience.(6)

Following the integration of the high schools, the junior high schools and elementary schools soon followed suit. By 1962, two of the previously all-white junior high schools had been integrated, and five of the nine previously segregated grade schools had been desegregated.(7) The next step towards integration involved the discontinuation of Western as a high school and downgrading it to an elementary school.

In 1964, Western ninth graders were assigned to Foust or Eastern Junior Highs, and the next year, seventh and eighth graders were assigned to other junior high schools. Beginning with the 1965-66 school year, Western had become an integrated elementary school. An interesting note to the Western story is that while it was a combination junior high/elementary school, the 1963 mixed chorus sang "We Are Climbin' Jacob's Ladder," "Ezekiel Saw the Wheel," and "No Man is an Island" at the graduation ceremony. In 1964, the Western mixed chorus sang "We Are Americans Too," an oration was given by Ernest Emery titled "Optimism—Formula for Freedom," and Edna Duneghy sang a solo titled "Song of the Soul" at the 1964 graduation ceremony.(8) With Western becoming a grade school, integration in Owensboro was complete.

Once integrated, students were put in the situation of daily interacting with students of another race. It was obvious at first that fear of the unknown caused black and white students to stay away from each other. One teacher mentioned that most black students tended to shy away from joining social clubs and were somewhat intimidated because they felt like invaders.(9) This unease and distrust was reflected when black students did run for elective offices: black students tended to vote for other black students while white students voted primarily for other white students. In the first few years of desegregation, black students were unable to elect one of their own to an office because they were a minority.(10)

One area in which black students immediately made an impact was athletics. Blacks and whites who played together on athletic teams shared common experiences on the field that helped them learn to accept each other off the field and in the classroom. Depending on each other in such team sports as basketball and football enabled black and white students to slowly break down prejudice and develop trust.

Owensboro Senior High fielded championship teams in basketball, football, and track, due in large part to the larger talent pool to select from following integration. In the first year of integration, the Owensboro Senior High basketball team posted sixteen wins against only one loss. In fact, it has been suggested that one of the reasons Senior High absorbed grades nine through twelve of Western High is because Western had beaten Senior High in basketball.(11) Regardless, integration helped bring black and white students closer together.

Another aspect of integration in public schools that is often overlooked is the situation facing black teachers. Even though black teachers were certified to teach and were guaranteed their jobs, most of them remained insecure regarding the much larger number of white teachers and staff members. Principal Joe Brown helped ease the way for black teachers to be accepted by their white counterparts by not tolerating any animosity and encouraging acceptance.(12) With the passage of time and strong leadership, integration enjoyed a fairly smooth transition in Owensboro schools.

With the integration of schools, the quality of education for blacks increased. "Separate but equal" had been applied as separate, but not equal. Textbooks were second-hand and outdated; materials such as paper, desks, and athletic uniforms were either inadequate or nonexistent; and lack of funding to alleviate these problems hindered black teachers' efforts to teach their black students.(13) When public schools became integrated in Owensboro, increased funding and materials gave black students the same educational opportunities as white students. Integration was important in public schools because for the first time, black and white students could interact on a large scale instead of being sheltered.

Public housing in Owensboro in the 1960's was extremely segregated. Many sections of town were completely segregated, including some sections of town that blacks didn't go after dark, and some that whites didn't go to alter dark.(14)

Much of Owensboro was segregated as evidenced by these numbers:(15)

Nannie Locke	50 units/50 blacks
P.G. Walker	50 units/50 blacks
Harry C. Smith	123 units/98% white
Rolling Heights	274 units/97% white
Rolling Heights Addition	30 units/30 whites

There were sections of town in which poor blacks and whites lived together such as Mechanicsville and Baptist Town, but most blacks and whites lived in segregated sections of the city if at all possible. In fact, the 1979 Kentucky State Commission on Housing ruled that Owensboro was the third most segregated city in Kentucky, behind Murray and Hazard.(16) Segregation in Owensboro rarely translated into violence, but it was readily apparent in public housing. Steps have been taken towards Affirmative Action in public housing, but the numbers have been slow to reflect those efforts.

No written documentation indicates that Owensboro differed from many other comparable American cities regarding racial segregation. Kentucky passed a state Civil Rights Act on January 27, 1966, which took effect on July 1st, 1966. Under the leadership of Governor Edward T. Breathitt, Kentucky became the first southern state to pass a statewide Civil Rights bill. This Civil Rights bill applied to non-discriminatory practices in employment, public housing, public institutions, and education.(17) The state government issued pamphlets to city governments to assist them in dealing with the issue of desegregation. These policies extended to public institutions including schools and recreation facilities such as swimming pools and parks, but they also carried over into private facilities. For example, theatres were opened to blacks in the late 1950's. Soon after, restaurants, stores, barber shops, and churches opened their doors to members of both races. Despite legal implementation of civil rights legislation, an unspoken policy of segregation was continued by many institutions.(18) Overcoming these prejudices required time and patience of those struggling against them.

Employment practices followed a set standard in Owensboro. The number of jobs available to blacks was comparable to that of whites, but blacks were relegated to holding certain jobs with

little promise of upward mobility. Jobs open to blacks were limited to areas subservient to whites including serving as cooks, house servants, and the all-encompassing field of janitorial services. One of the few institutions in which blacks worked side by side with whites was at the local steel mill, integrated in 1953.(19) With the national Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Kentucky Civil Rights Act of 1966, employment opportunities slowly become comparable to those of whites. State and local commissions on human rights were formed to ensure that fair employment practices were followed.

Blacks encountered difficulties gaining acceptance into local government. The first black to run for an elective office was John Williams, who ran for Owensboro city commissioner in 1965. Williams earned enough votes to make it through the primary and run for election. In the election, Williams finished last with 2,296 votes. Future Mayor Irvin Terrill finished first with 6,971 votes.(20) It wasn't until 1985 that Owensboro elected its first (And only) black city commissioner, Reverend R.L. McFarland. The growing influence of blacks in community affairs has been slow regarding local government positions.

Racial superiority groups such as the KIu Klux Klan and Black Panthers never gained a solid foothold in Owensboro. Any violence or demonstrations that occurred in Owensboro were limited to personal grievances instead of random acts taken against other groups. When Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968, the reaction in Owensboro was much calmer than in many cities. Riots that took place in such cities as Cincinnati and Pittsburgh never materialized in Owensboro. Instead, a "Day of Prayer" was called for.

The largest outbreak of racial violence occurred in August 1968. The incident began with the shooting death of twenty-nine year old Henderson resident Jerry Brown. Mr. Brown was shot at the Formal Club at about 12:15 A.M. Saturday, August 17, by twenty-eight year old Monroe Griffith of Owensboro, his business associate, during an argument. Disorders arose when witnesses felt police, who had arrived quickly, were slow to call for an ambulance.(21)

During the time lag, blacks in attendance became restless and angry. The group of blacks, which eventually had grown to over 200 people, began to throw rocks, taunt police officers at the scene, and rock cars nearby. When Mayor Irvin Terrill arrived on the scene shortly thereafter in an attempt to restore order, his car was rocked and pelted with objects, one of which broke his window, resulting in a slight cut over his left eye. The demonstration took place in the areas between 4th and 5th streets, extending to Elm and Walnut Streets. The crowd did not disperse until about 5:30 that morning. Police reported that nineteen cars were damaged by foreign objects and that several shots were fired, but there were no major fires or acts of vandalism. Two men were arrested for violating a state law against inciting a riot: twenty-six year old Lorenzo Williams and eighteen year hold Charles Howell, both of Owensboro.(22)

In the early morning hours of Saturday, August 17, Mayor Terrill and County Judge Pat Tanner called for a city-wide curfew going into effect at 8:00 P.M. and extending until 6:00 A.M. Sunday morning. The curfew extended to closing businesses on Saturday in an effort to keep people off the streets. A seventeen block area was also cordoned off from 3rd and 7th Streets to Walnut and Frayser Streets to deter the curious, but complaints of white sightseers were still voiced by residents of the area. Reverend John Dunaway called for a "Day of Prayer" in trying to help cool tensions, and he also announced that a meeting would be held that Monday afternoon at 2:00 P.M. for residents to voice their opinions regarding the incident.(23)

The next day, Sunday, August 18th, twenty-one people were arrested for violating and continuing curfew. John Debow, Bill T. Miller, Geraldine Riley, and James Lorenzo Williams were arrested on charges of disorderly conduct. Williams had been released that morning on

$5,000 bond after being charged with inciting a riot on Saturday. Three people were arrested for carrying concealed weapons and eleven others were arrested in violation of curfew. Mayor Terrill called for the curfew to be extended for Sunday night, with the sale of all alcoholic beverages prohibited.(24)

The Sunday issue of the *Messenger-Inquirer* included an Associated Press on the front page titled: "Police Say Curfew Best Riot Control." This article dealt with a study of eight American cities placed under curfew to combat race riots following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4th 1968. Cincinnati, Ohio; Greensboro, N.C.; Kansas City, Mo.; Trenton, J.H.; Pittsburgh, Pa.; Wilmington, Del.; Richmond, Va.; and Memphis, Tenn. (Where King was killed) were the cities studied. This article was most likely issued by the paper in another attempt to defuse tension.

On Monday, August 19, charges of police brutality were brought against five officers following the public hearing that afternoon. Thirty-five officers came to the meeting in protest and defense of the charges brought against the five officers. An affidavit was filed by Carolyn McNary, Edna Valentine, George Bond Jr., and Charles Howell. The affidavit charged Detectives Fred Hall and Jack Braden, Patrolmen Henry Roach Jr., David Rose, and David Glass with use of excessive force in handling the riot situation. The charge against Glass was that he entered the house at 914 West 4th Street without a search warrant. Radio Dispatcher Richard McDaniel and fellow officers stated that Glass was not in that part of town at the time of the alleged incident. The Board of Commissioners ruled that the charges against all of the officers were being questioned in light of the discrepancies involving the Glass incident. None of the officers were suspended or punished for the charges brought against them.(25)

At the Monday afternoon meeting, the Human Relations panel came up with four conclusions regarding the situation. It encouraged the mayor to go on the radio to review "current community conditions," hoping that Monday night's curfew would be the last for the city (The county-wide curfew had been lifted the night before); the panel found that all officers in the area had been going about their normal duties; a request was put in for an information center to be opened, for this disturbance and future incidents, where facts and information would be given to the public in order to dispel rumors; and the panel called for mutual respect to be extended by both the police and the public. The committee also announced plans to hold another public meeting on Monday, August 26, at 2:00 P.M.(26)

The curfew was extended to Monday night, but following the calm Monday, Mayor Irvin Terrill announced that the curfew would be lifted for Tuesday night. During the time the curfew was imposed, fifty-one people were arrested for curfew violations ranging from inciting a riot to violating curfew restrictions. On Tuesday afternoon, County Judge Pat Tanner also criticized the *Messenger-Inquirer* for "constantly stirring up sectionalism" between the city and county. But due to the calm, rational efforts of Owensboro's leaders and police officers, a dangerous situation was controlled with a minimum of disruption and violence.(27)

Later that week, disturbance broke out in Evansville after three white men were arrested and charged with assault and battery after a black woman was grazed by an arrow and a window had been broken out in a black family's home. The unrest escalated into rioting later that night after officers stopped two carloads of blacks in stolen cars. Other blacks maintained that the violence erupted as a reaction to officers fighting with a black youth who had been running through the area.(28)

The Evansville City Council imposed a curfew on the city that extended from 8:00 P.M. to 5:00 A.M. and banned the sale of liquor, firearms, and ammunition. The disorder continued

through Friday night with four people injured as a direct result. Carolyn Gold was struck by a ricocheting bullet, Patrolman Leonard Stilwell suffered a bullet wound in his right shoulder while he was guarding a fire hose, and two firemen were injured while fighting the resulting fires. The two nights of rioting, which included shooting, vandalizing, looting, and firebombing, resulted in property damage estimated at $275,000. The worst damage was caused by a $250,000 fire at Cottage Building Products Co., a lumber yard in the middle of Evansville's black neighborhood. Five other businesses suffered damage as a result of the rioting.(29) The violence and chaos experienced in Evansville illustrate the underlying tensions still existing between blacks and whites, as well as how fortunate residents of Owensboro were that the disturbances there were moderate in comparison to those suffered in other communities.

On Wednesday, September 4, charges were heard against five officers charged with brutality during Owensboro's racial disturbances. Two of the officers, Detective Fred W. Hall and Patrolman Henry Roach Jr. had been charged before. The other three officers charged were Patrolmen William N. Estes, Bill Pyland Jr., and James Yeckering. The charges were heard and dismissed by the board of commissioners, headed by Mayor Irvin Terrill.(30)

After the riots, a group was formed by Mayor Terrill's Human Relations Committee to uncover the basic problems within Owensboro's black community. The chairman of this committee was Reverend John Dunaway. Wednesday, September 11, the Committee outlined a set of main problems facing Owensboro. According to the committee, housing, streets, sidewalks, street lighting, employment practices, and representation of minority groups on government committees and boards were causing problems for blacks. Five subcommittees were organized to address these issues: Housing; Streets, Sidewalks, and Lighting; Employment Practices; Employment Communications; and Minority Representation on Government Commissions and Boards.(31) These committees represent an effort put forth by Owensboro in race relations that was not found in many areas.

In summary, relations between blacks and whites in Owensboro during the 1960's involved an initial distrust that, while occasionally marred by strife, slowly developed into a growing sense of respect and acceptance. One story I came across in conducting interviews effectively illustrates the pride and independence of blacks seeking equality in society. The story comes from Donald Owsley (President of Owensboro Chapter of NAACP from 1965-75) when he was a young boy in his father's (C.T. Owsley) barber shop. According to Donald, several wealthy white men received haircuts in his father's barber shop. One day, while Donald was receiving a haircut from his father, he asked his father why he didn't ask his wealthy white customers for financial assistance. Donald said his father stopped cutting his hair, slowly swiveled the chair around, looked him in the eye, and said: "Son, those men don't owe me anything but their business and the respect they give me. It's up to me to better my life." According to Mr. Owsley, this story reflects the attitude of independence that was a tremendous asset to blacks during the turmoil of the 1960's.

Great strides were made in Owensboro regarding race relations in the 1960's. Desegregation in education, public housing, public institutions, employment, and government was mandated in the 1960's, but its effects weren't completely felt until the 1970's.(32) With integration, many myths and prejudices on both sides were shattered. Blacks and whites in Owensboro have been able to interact on a much larger scale that has increased understanding through the sharing of common experiences.

End Notes

1. Juan Williams, *Eyes On the Prize*. (Minneapolis, 1988), 312.
2. Owensboro *Messenger-Inquirer*, May 10, 1984.
3. Bell, Lisa, "Achieving Equality: Desegregation of the Owensboro Schools, 1955-1969," *The Daviess County Historical Quarterly*. April 1989, 26.
4. Williams, *Eyes On the Prize*, 173.
5. Henderson, Danny, Editorial to Owensboro *Messenger-Inquirer*, May 14, 1984.
6. Interview with Bob Kunkle, April 18, 1993.
7. Bell, "*Achieving Equality*," 30.
8. *Western Hi-Lites*, Western Junior High School Yearbook, 1963-64.
9. Bell, "*Achieving Equality*," 31.
10. Interview with Donald Owsley, April 27, 1993.
11. Interview with Donald Owsley.
12. Bell, "*Achieving Equality*," 31.
13. Interview with Bob Kunkle.
14. Interview with Donald Owsley.
15. Kentucky State Housing Commission Report-1979, and interview with Donald Owsley.
16. Kentucky State Housing Commission Report-1979.
17. Kentucky State Commission on Human Rights-Fifth Report, 1966.
18. Interview with Bob Kunkle.
19. Interview with Donald Owsley.
20. Owensboro *Messenger-Inquirer*, July 21, 1965.
21. Owensboro *Messenger-Inquirer*, August 18, 1968.
22. Owensboro *Messenger-Inquirer*, August 18, 1968.
23. Owensboro *Messenger-Inquirer*, August 18, 1968.
24. Owensboro *Messenger-Inquirer*, August 19, 1968.
25. Owensboro *Messenger-Inquirer*, August 20, 1968.
26. Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer, August 21, 1968
27. Owensboro *Messenger-Inquirer*, August 22, 1968.
28. Owensboro *Messenger-Inquirer*, August 25, 1968.
29. Owensboro *Messenger-Inquirer*, August 25, 1968.
30. Owensboro *Messenger-Inquirer*, September 5, 1968.
31. Owensboro *Messenger-Inquirer*, September 11, 1968
32. Interview with Donald Owsley.