

# The Daviess County Historical Quarterly

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## THE EDITOR'S PAGE

The Owensboro Human Relations Commission was formed during a time of much nationwide racial tension, and did much to steer the people of Owensboro through a time of great change and progress in the era of race relations. Lauralee McClanahan, a native of Virginia, is a 1987 graduate of Kentucky Wesleyan College.

## **The Owensboro Human Relations Commission, 1963-1985**

**By Lauralee McClanahan**

"We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal..." or are they? H. E. Goodloe questioned this statement of our forefathers as he and seven other men met with Mayor Benjamin Hawes and the Owensboro City Commissioners August 16, 1963. The other men on the committee were J.V.A. Winsett, Wesley Action [sic -Acton], H.J. Schupbach, Lewis Gubrud, W.R. Brown, Otis B. Smith, and C.D. Davidson. The eight men, led by Goodloe, met with Mayor Hawes and commissioners Irvin Terrell, George Greer, Tom Sweat and Doug Williams to suggest that a committee be established to explore seven areas where racial discrimination may exist. They were as follows:

- 1) How well was Owensboro performing toward meeting the standards of an "All American City" when it came to equal opportunity for all?
- 2) How well did Owensboro meet the problem of fair employment practices to all citizens regardless of race or creed?
- 3) How well did Owensboro meet the needs of providing decent, safe, and sanitary homes for all its citizens?
- 4) Kentucky law forbade racial and religious discrimination in the employment practices of departments of state government under the merit system.
- 5) The federal executive order under which the federal government forbade racial discrimination in the employment practices of private employers having contracts with the federal government.
- 6) Pupil integration in the public schools of Owensboro has progressed well, but what has been done concerning the integration of teachers?
- 7) What was the attitude of churches toward this business of "whosoever will, let him come"?

The plea for a Human Rights Committee came during a time of great racial tension for the whole country. Martin Luther King, who made his famous "I Have A Dream" speech just twelve days after Goodloe's presentation, called for non-violent civil rights. Malcolm X, on the other hand, repudiated white society and advocated violence to achieve equality. White men all over the South expressed horror and outrage as black men demanded equal rights.

The City Commissioners voted unanimously in favor of the committee and in August 1963, Mayor Hawes agreed to appoint a Bi- Racial Committee on Human Rights. The only disagreement was by Commissioner Doug Williams who wondered if churches should not be left out. He felt that including religion may interfere with the legal issue of separation of church and state. The Owensboro Ministerial Association was asked to appoint a committee to investigate integration of churches. The committee, and later The Human Relations Commission, stayed out of the religious arena until 1974 when it ventured into the area. It was decided that the volunteer committee would serve until the first Monday in January, the end of Mayor Hawes' term in office, or it could be terminated by mutual consent of Mayor Hawes and the committee before the end of his term. Mayor Hawes asked eighteen men to serve on the committee, but only seven agreed. The others, fearing potential problems, declined because they were "afraid to touch it." The seven who agreed to serve were J.V. Vititow, an insurance salesman and member of the Owensboro City Schoolboard, H.E. Goodloe, assistant director of urban renewal; Lonnie Hayden, employee of Texas Gas; Charles J. Fiden, a Public Relations man at General Electric; Dr. Harold J. Schupbach; The Reverend Thomas Clark, and C.D. Davidson, a local merchant. Goodloe, Hayden, and Davidson were black. Schupbach, Goodloe, and Davidson were three of the original eight men responsible for the formation of the Bi- Racial Committee on Human Rights.

It is impossible to know for sure why Benjamin Hawes formed the Bi- Racial Committee. Mayor Hawes had a history of opposition to committees because he felt they became "focal points of trouble instead of reaching solutions." He hoped the Committee would prevent racial incidents. He said "the city appreciates the strength and good judgement of both races in handling the situation up to the present." I spoke with Mr. Tom Sweat, a Commissioner during Mayor Hawes' term. Mr. Sweat feels that Mayor Hawes established the Committee because he felt a genuine need for it and that he was not under any pressure at all to form the Committee. He said that Owensboro did not have any serious racial trouble and therefore there was no need for Mayor Hawes to feel pressured. A member of the original Bin Racial Committee who prefers to remain anonymous believes that Mayor Hawes was indeed under a great deal of social pressure to form the committee. He agreed with Sweat that Owensboro did not have serious racial troubles, but felt that Owensboro was not ready to accept racial equality. By supporting the Committee, a citizen was supporting racial equality. He felt that Committee members were faced with a great deal of peer tension.

The Committee continued to report and investigate areas of potential racial tension and unrest until September 1972 when the Bi-Racial Committee on Human Rights became the Human Relations Commission. Mayor Waitman Taylor appointed Joseph L Hagan Chairman and Harry Fields Vice-Chairman. Charles Leachman, the current Executive Director, feels that the changeover to a Human Relations Commission from a Bi-Racial Committee allowed for a broader base from which to work. The Commission could deal with a greater variety of problems. As in 1972, there are still twenty-four volunteer commissioners who help set policy and give direction to the Commission.

In January 1973, the Commission presented its By-Laws for approval. Only six of the commissioners were present so a quorum of one-quarter was set to conduct official business. The

newly adopted By-Laws called for an annual election of the Commissioner by the Commission membership. Any commissioner with three unexcused absences would be replaced.

Joseph Hagan mailed his resignation to Mayor Taylor in August 1973. He felt that his duties as President of the Lions Club and President of the local American Cancer Society prevented him from adequately fulfilling his duties. Hagan felt that many of the problems with the Commission were because he, and other Commissioners, had too many other obligations to take an active interest in the Commission. Hagan's resignation had been called for at the Commission's May meeting by fellow Commissioner Marnell James. James felt that Hagan failed to provide enthusiastic leadership. Harry Fields, Vice-Chairman, became acting Chairman.

In September 1973, the Commission met with Mayor Waitman Taylor. They were seeking his support for the employment of an Executive Director. The Commission reported that many black women who had good grades in secretarial school were unable to pass the standardized tests required for employment. The Commission did not feel that discrimination was a factor. They used this report as an example of why an Executive Director was needed. The Director would conduct the necessary studies to inform the Commission of where problems may lie.

The largest blockade to the hiring of an Executive Director was the Commission's \$2,400 per year budget which was being used to pay a part time secretary. The Commission asked Mayor Taylor to appropriate up to \$13,600 from city funds for a full time Executive Director and Secretary. Taylor reported that he could not take money from city coffers and suggested that the Commission search for other sources of funds. Mayor Taylor asked to have sixty days to search for state or federal programs so that the Commission's needs could be met. He suggested using more volunteer labor and using the available funds to hire a retired person on a fixed income who would have more time and ability. The Commission agreed to give Mayor Taylor the time he requested before pursuing the funds themselves.

In November 1973, Mayor Taylor promised that if he could not locate the needed funds, and if the Commission still felt strongly that it needed an Executive Director, he would find the money in the city budget. Fields said he would hold the Mayor to his promise. The Commission however, was now requesting \$13,900 to \$16,000. The Commission was allowed to hire a part time Executive Director and in April 1974, the Human Relations Commission hired its first full time Executive Director. In November 1976, Charles Leachman, the current Executive Director, was appointed by the Commission's Board of Directors. (The Board of Directors is appointed by the Mayor for three year terms).

Mayor Taylor promised the Commission office space four days per week in the City Hall Building in March 1974. The Owensboro Human Relations Commission has had a permanent, full time home since the completion of the present City Hall Building.

The Commission has grown and changed a great deal since its beginning in 1963. There are still twenty-four volunteer Commissioners. There is an equal number of white and black Commission members. I interviewed Charles Leachman, the current Executive Director. His qualifications are a Bachelors Degree in Social Sciences. Mr. Leachman did add, however, that community service work with a background in research in community problems would qualify a person for the job.

The Commission meets on the second Tuesday of every month. They discuss finances, activities of the staff complaints, and committee reports. The Commission has several committees such as a housing committee and an unemployment committee to investigate each area.

The Commission deals with discrimination based on race, color, national origin, sex, age or religion. Their current budget comes from the city budget and is currently \$50,000 with grants such as their Federal Job Training Program.

The Human Relations Commission does not charge a fee for its services. The Commission is not a law enforcement agency. When a complaint is filed, the Commission first decides if it falls into one of the areas that they cover. After the complaint is put in the proper category such as race, sex, etc., it must be decided whether or not the complaint is timely. On the state level, the complaint must be filed within one hundred and eighty days. On the Federal level this time period is extended to three hundred days. There are numerous state and Federal laws dealing with discrimination. They could not possibly all be listed on this paper. State discrimination laws are found in section 344 of The Kentucky Revised Statutes. Federal laws dealing with discrimination can be found under Title Fourty-two of The United States Code. If the complaint is indeed valid the Commission thoroughly investigates it and turns it over to the proper agency. The Commission works with the Kentucky Commission on Human Rights, which is a law enforcement agency, as well as agencies such as The Civil Liberties Union, Legal Aid, NAACP, and the ACLU to name just a few.

In Kentucky, a business must have eight or more employees to be considered on the state level. The Federal government requires at least fifteen employees. If discrimination exists in a business that does not fall under state or Federal laws, the Commission tries to mediate the case until a resolution is reached.

When asked how discrimination has changed from the 1960's to the 1980's, Mr. Leachman said that discrimination is still very real but not as obvious. In the 1960's racial discrimination was very blatant but today it is subtle and very often hard to prove. Racial and sexual discrimination occur the most. Housing and public accomodation cases are rare but still occur.

Along with handling discrimination cases, The Human Relations Commission offers Affirmative Action Technical Services, Cultural Awareness Activities, Human Relations Week and they also operate a job bank.

The Owensboro Human Relations Commission has proven to be an effective service organization. Mr. Leachman has great dedication to his work. While discrimination will probably never end, the Commission gives those who have been discriminated against hope for the future.

