
PETERSBURG
VOICES OF CIVIL RIGHTS:
THE ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEW OF WILLIS BROWN

conducted by

Hermanze Fauntleroy

March 9, 2007

Petersburg, Virginia

HALASZ REPORTING & VIDEOCONFERENCE

P.O. Box 1644

Richmond, VA 23218-1644

(804) 708-0025

Transcribed by: George M. Halasz, RDR

(Interview of Willis Brown
conducted by Hermanze Fauntleroy.)

BY MR. FAUNTLEROY:

Q I am Hermanze Fauntleroy. Today is March 9, 2007. I shall be interviewing Mr. Willis Brown in reference to the civil rights era in the City of Petersburg, and some of which took place at that time and his knowledge of what took place as he knows it at that point. Mr. Brown graduated from Peabody High School, which I think is critical in this situation because we had segregated schools at that time.

A Yes.

Q And he was a part of that system. Mr. Brown, do you have any memory of violation of civil rights, your civil rights in the City of Petersburg, and what do you recall the situation was during that time?

A Well, growing up in Petersburg I experienced this as a young child, shopping downtown in the department stores. I always observed water fountains, which was marked "Colored" water fountains at certain stores, and I didn't understand what that was all about. However, I have occasion

1 to go there to take a sip of water and it always
2 seemed normal. But in my mind, I always wondered,
3 you know, why was it marked as such. That was one
4 of my earliest recollections of it.

5 Q At that time when you noticed that that
6 was the situation and you tasted the water and
7 didn't see any difference in it, so to speak, what
8 type of effect or what type of impact did that have
9 on you as a young child growing up under those
10 conditions?

11 A Well, I had great interest in what was
12 going on, but being young, I didn't ask anybody. I
13 just thought that was a fact of life, that was the
14 way life was, and I didn't question it so much then.

15 Q In reference to later, as you became older
16 and you grew up, began school, and of course the
17 schools were at that time segregated in the City of
18 Petersburg, did you give any further thought to what
19 you had experienced earlier?

20 A Yes. Most definitely. We just didn't ask
21 adults, you know, what was going on as we just
22 thought it was the way of life to go along with the
23 situation that was at hand. However, in school we
24 noted a difference in maybe the books we were using
25 may have been used, they weren't very new books.

1 Some were. And a lot of sports equipment was used
2 when we got it, there weren't the best, but we made
3 the best of what we had and created some
4 championships. This was one of the things that I
5 noticed in school life that seemed to have an effect
6 on me.

7 Q Did you give any thought to the fact that
8 there may have been some difference between being a
9 student at Peabody High School and what you thought
10 may have been happening at Petersburg High School
11 during that period of time?

12 A Yes. I knew it was a segregation thing it
13 was -- there was the Peabody High School and the
14 Petersburg High School, and we had our differences,
15 you know, as the high school. All through
16 graduation I thought this is the way life was going
17 to be. I didn't question that much about it. But I
18 just tried to adjust my life and go on with it and
19 make the best of what I had to do with it anyway.

20 Q When you recognized the fact that white
21 students in the City of Petersburg were attending
22 Petersburg High School, and all of the black
23 students were attending Peabody High School as far
24 as the high school education is concerned, did you
25 give any real thought to why this was happening this

1 way?

2 A Oh, yes. Most definitely. I know in
3 Peabody School it was some smart kids and we weren't
4 any different from anybody else. We had people that
5 made honor roll as well that -- I guess anybody
6 could do along the way and you was just separate as
7 children going to different schools.

8 There were different walks down
9 Sycamore Street. As a child I wanted to be a part
10 of it to make a difference, however, I wasn't geared
11 in that way to go, but I knew that the sit-ins at
12 Woolworth's and McClelland's downtown were to make
13 things better for us, but I unfortunately did not
14 participate, however I did want to do that.

15 Q Well, as you mentioned Sycamore Street,
16 what was happening particularly on Sycamore Street
17 in the stores, what we refer to as the five and dime
18 stores at that time --

19 A Yeah, uh-huh.

20 Q -- we recognized that there was a
21 difference; if you went in the store --

22 A Oh, yes.

23 Q -- to spend your money that there was no
24 problem in the store accepting your money for the
25 merchandise --

1 A Yes, that's right.

2 Q -- that you were buying, but if you wanted
3 to sit at the lunch counter --

4 A Oh, that was a --

5 Q -- you might have been able to buy a
6 hotdog, but you couldn't sit and eat it there.

7 A Right.

8 Q Did you see any problem with that? Did
9 you give any real consideration --

10 A Oh, yes.

11 Q -- as to why?

12 A Yes, I did. It come across my mind
13 several times shopping, like you said, and going
14 down, want to purchase a meal and not -- it wasn't a
15 question of like we have today, is that to eat here
16 or to go? It definitely was to go. That was
17 definitely a fact. You wasn't even asked that
18 question. You couldn't eat a meal down on Sycamore
19 Street at that time.

20 Q Did you, at that time, did you consider
21 that there was a difference between you as a black
22 and whites who were able to sit at that lunch
23 counter and eat?

24 A Yeah. I knew it wasn't a difference. I
25 knew it, because in some of these restaurants they

1 had blacks serving and even preparing foods, but yet
2 and still we could not eat there. That bothered me
3 a great deal.

4 Q Do you recall the fact that there was a
5 struggle developing, if you will, in terms of trying
6 to make a difference in that situation, those
7 conditions in reference to the City of Petersburg?

8 A Yes, it was a struggle. I knew there was
9 different meetings, tried to make things better for
10 blacks, and they had a lot of mass meetings around
11 town, trying to get things equal to all people, and
12 I was aware of all of this going on and I wanted to
13 be a part of it. I did attend a lot of mass
14 meetings to see this was carried out, and it wasn't
15 a difference as people, black or white, it was just
16 the way we were separated at that time.

17 Q Do you recall any of the people,
18 particularly ministers in the City of Petersburg who
19 were involved and who were making strides to try to
20 cause changes to take place?

21 A Oh, yes. My pastor at Zion Baptist Church
22 years ago, R. G. Williams, was greatly involved in
23 the movement. And various other churches around
24 Petersburg, they always got together and had the
25 mass meetings, and this was various explanation for

1 churches to be involved in the situation like this,
2 but I knew one day things were going to get better.
3 I knew because we were going the right direction.

4 Q Do you recall what took place in those
5 mass meetings in terms of the people attending the
6 meetings and how the people reacted, if you will, to
7 what was being done in those meetings?

8 A Those meetings were well attended. Most
9 of the mass meetings they had were -- crowd was full
10 to the walls, very -- a lot of concern there. They
11 want to do it in a right way, a peaceful way to make
12 better things -- better for our city, and through
13 the walks in the city, and I think it did. It just
14 took patience, people very excited about doing this
15 in the right manner, a peaceful way.

16 Q You mentioned Reverend R. G. Williams.
17 Obviously he was deeply involved. Do you recall the
18 Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker being a part of the
19 process?

20 A Most definitely. Yes. They always walked
21 hand and hand, shoulder to shoulder, trying to make
22 things better for this area, and they succeed.
23 Milton Reid of First Baptist Church, he was also
24 involved in this a great deal, and this unity
25 between the churches, I figured things were going to

1 get better by the sitting in and the mass meetings.
2 Everybody was real excited about what was going on
3 to make things better.

4 Q Do you recall the situations, if you will,
5 that developed out of those mass meetings? What did
6 the people do, if you will, as a result of attending
7 those mass meetings?

8 A Well, they discussed different issues, how
9 we were treated, blacks were treated, and they made
10 sit-ins a whole lot better than what it was. They
11 performed sit-ins at Woolworth's and W. T. Grant and
12 different other -- Ruckers-Rosenstock's, places like
13 that.

14 Q Do you recall that there were a number of
15 people who participated in that?

16 A Yes, most definitely. They normally
17 was -- well, marched down Sycamore Street, and go to
18 one business to another to see the different
19 response. There were some arrests during that time,
20 and fortunately the people didn't stay in jail that
21 long. They just -- a short period of time, they put
22 fear into people not to do it again, but there was a
23 lot of progress done through that.

24 Q Did the blacks in Petersburg and the
25 churches, you've mentioned this, but did they

1 really, really become involved in terms of the
2 number of people growing and more people becoming
3 involved in the whole struggle, if you will?

4 A Yes. Yes. A great number of people were
5 involved in it, however, it could have been much
6 more, but people just afraid of maybe being --
7 getting into trouble, so they backed off, and -- but
8 it could have been a much greater number involved in
9 these sit-ins. I think it was a great number that
10 participate along with this, still.

11 Q Based on what you've said, would you say
12 that most of the churches in the City of Petersburg
13 at that time really were involved in helping to
14 cause all of this to happen, the changes to begin to
15 take place?

16 A Yes. It was the church, it was the
17 backbone of the church. People had that faith that
18 they could carry on and change the segregation thing
19 that was going on and make things better for the
20 city. Churches had a lot of inspiration in the
21 people to come, and even the people that weren't
22 church goers was really involved in these
23 situations. It was making them better as people in
24 the city.

25 Q Let me go back to the school system

1 situation for a while. We -- based on your
2 responses, the school system was segregated.

3 A Yes.

4 Q And there were separate schools for blacks
5 and separate schools for whites. In addition to
6 what you've already said, do you recall any real
7 differences that you remember in terms of what was
8 taking place from maybe an educational point of view
9 as far as the schools were concerned?

10 A The schools -- during my era I think that
11 we had very qualified teachers that taught us to the
12 limits. We tried to learn as much as we could. The
13 educational part of it I thought we were just
14 getting -- I knew we were getting better -- just as
15 good an education as Petersburg High was. Today we
16 have a lot of students that during that era have
17 gone to high ranks in society, so they had to be --
18 the education we got from Peabody was just as good
19 as anywhere else in the state.

20 Q Do you think, do you know whether or not
21 your teachers had the same type of information
22 available to them as the teachers at Petersburg High
23 School might have had?

24 A I think they had good material to work
25 with. During my era, I think that my teachers

1 had -- they did their homework, so they'd go do
2 their own research and got more material as much as
3 they got, but the material that was issued through
4 the school board I think may not have been accurate,
5 but I had real -- I give my credit to my former
6 teachers I had in high school. They really taught,
7 and had the interest in the students at all -- they
8 take the time after school to encourage the extra
9 mile to really make sure that child got the proper
10 education.

11 Q Do you recall Martin Luther King coming to
12 the City of Petersburg?

13 A Yes, I do. I recall -- I didn't have the
14 opportunity to actually see him, but I recall it was
15 a really big event. During that era I probably
16 was -- as a young child I had a little job after
17 school and I didn't get a chance to see a lot of
18 these things that go on, but I did hear of it and
19 knowing that he was in town was a great honor.

20 Q Well, as we both know, I'm sure, he was
21 quite involved in the movement.

22 A Yes.

23 Q In the struggle.

24 A Yes.

25 Q And unfortunately, at a point in time

1 somewhere around 1968 he was assassinated.

2 A Yes.

3 Q How did that affect you as an individual?

4 A It really hurt. It hurt. When I heard
5 about this event happening, it really brought me to
6 a complete standstill. I thought, here is an
7 individual trying to make things better for our
8 people, and somebody has taken them away. How
9 far -- would this happen to anybody else that come
10 along the way that tried to make things better for
11 us? It was a real touching thing. Just feel like a
12 dark cloud just came over my life, all of my
13 surroundings. It was really a hurting thing.

14 Q What do you think about the difference, if
15 any, in -- or between that period of time during the
16 civil rights struggle and what the situation or the
17 conditions are along those same lines as far as
18 Petersburg is concerned?

19 A Well, I think Petersburg has come a long
20 way, and we have a long ways to go. It is a lot of
21 development things that have happened around the
22 city. We have a lot of blacks that are in the
23 positions now that weren't in during those days, and
24 trying to make it, but I'm concerned about the young
25 people today, not focusing on the right thing in

1 life. And I try to take the time to explain to
2 young people the experience I had, how it was, and I
3 hope that they would pay attention and focus to make
4 themselves better in their dress, in their
5 appearance, their conversation, what they listen to
6 from day to day is very important, and if they knew
7 how hard the struggle was during the sixties and
8 seventies, they would make better citizens of the
9 city. My greatest concern about the children of
10 today.

11 Q Do you think that there are opportunities
12 today that blacks really didn't have --

13 A Oh, yes. Yes.

14 Q -- during the sixties?

15 A Yes, most definitely. They can set their
16 goals whatever they want to do, doctors, lawyers,
17 even now running for president, so there's -- the
18 sky is the limit for children today, if they just
19 open up and just focus on the right things in life,
20 set their goals at the ceiling, I think it would be
21 a great thing if we just get them focused. And we
22 have to show our children the importance of this
23 today before somebody else show them they are going
24 in the wrong direction.

25 Q Well, then do you think there's a need to

1 do some different kinds of things, if you will, to
2 bring about maybe more understanding of what really
3 is available for some of those young people that you
4 are talking about and whether or not there's a need
5 really, from an adult point of view, to do what
6 needs to be done to help them?

7 A Yes. I think adults are really laying it
8 on line, letting them know exactly what's going on
9 now. They just can't focus on what need to be done.
10 They don't believe that the struggle was that tough,
11 when it actually was, and if we could just stay
12 focused on them and try to make them believe that
13 this is the right direction in life, there is no
14 other way. They got all the opportunities they
15 have -- they ever have. Just go out and do it.

16 Q Do you think that the struggle during the
17 sixties then was a situation that really should have
18 made it better for us and did make it better for us
19 in terms of African Americans in the City of
20 Petersburg?

21 A The struggle was a learning experience. I
22 think that it made it better for us, but every -- we
23 need to just let our young people know that this is
24 the only way to make a better life for themselves.
25 Yes.

1 Q Well, Mr. Brown, I really appreciate your
2 taking the time to come and share with us today --

3 A Yes.

4 Q -- and to provide your opinions of what
5 did take place and something about what the needs
6 are --

7 A Yes.

8 Q -- today. So again, thank you very much
9 for being here and thank you very much for coming.

10 A Glad to be here. Glad to share the
11 experience.

12 Q Thank you.

13 A Uh-huh.

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25