



City's First Black Police And First Black Police Commissioner

NAACP participants and guests packed the Lancaster Room of the Hyatt-Regency Hotel Friday night to honor Atlanta's first Black police officers. Award recipients shown above are (from left to right): Claude Dixon, Jr., a major on the Atlanta police force; Johnny P. Jones, now employed with the Housing Authority in Savannah, Ga.; Robert McKibbens, a sergeant on the Atlanta Police

force; Atlanta Public Safety Commissioner A. Reginald Eaves; Willard Strickland, now residing in New York; Ernest Lyons, Sergeant on the Atlanta police force; and Henry Hooks, retired Sergeant on the Atlanta police force. Officers Willie T. Elkins and John Sanders received awards posthumously. (Photo by H.C. Williams)

Atlantans Pay Tribute To City's First Black Police

By MARTHA G. FLEMING

It took almost 30 years but it was an occasion that was brought about by the toil and dedication of eight men who suffered the indignities of a segregated society and made their marks so that those who came after them were given a better place in which to live.

It was an occasion, according to Mayor Maynard Jackson, that every black Atlanta should "remember not to forget and never let it happen again."

The eight men, the first Black police officers to be sworn into the Atlanta police department, were honored by the National Association for the Advancement of -

Colored People (NAACP) - Friday night for their outstanding contributions to the cause of social justice and racial pride on a police force that denied them an equal opportunity to fully execute the ideas of justice and fair play to which they were duly sworn.

In greeting this honoree - Willie T. Elkins (deceased),

Willard Strickland, Robert McKibbens, John Sanders, Jr. (deceased), Ernest Lyons, Johnny P. Jones, Henry Hooks and Claude Dixon, Mayor Jackson said "these whom we honor tonight weren't allowed to do anything but risk their lives". He said the objective of the awards dinner was not to create a division among the races, but an occasion to remember the swearing in of Black police officers, who, at first, "couldn't change their clothes (uniforms) in the police station."

"The necessity of staying active, aggressive and on the case politically" Mayor Jackson told the guests gathered at the Regency, is the key to keeping in mind the struggles of Black people and the end to remaining a viable race.

In a documentary film on the Black police officer, narrated by Atlanta World city editor George Coleman and produced by cinematographer Joe Aina, four of the officers discussed the attitudes of the white officers held when they were sworn in on March 8, 1948 and the changes they have seen during the 29 years.

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"SPECIAL OFFICERS"

"We weren't really considered real police officers but 'special' officers", said Claude Dixon, a major on the Atlanta police force.

"The language in itself (during swearing-in ceremonies) was an insult. I remember having to say: 'I, a nigger cop do swear to uphold...'"

Dixon said "The Eight" also bore the indignities of not being able to carry their uniforms home, having a special court to try cases, and having to be headquartered in the basement of the Butler Street YMCA.

"The difference", Dixon said "is like night and day".

Rev. William Holmes Border, pastor of Wheat Street Baptist Church recalled 29 years ago when he, flanked with political activists Warren Cochran, C.A. Scott, Dr. Martin L. King, Sr. and C.L. Harper met with the Chief of Police Herbert Jenkins and Mayor William Hartsfield to get the first Black police officers hired.

Borders said the group, with Cochran as the "main brain", attempted to get the police officers hired "to the advantage of both groups with as little friction as possible."

The compromise, Borders said resulted in the Blacks officers policing the Black communities exclusively, - having to dress at the "Y" and executing no white arrests.

"It was an achievement for democracy", Borders said adding the end result was that Atlanta eventually swore in its first Black public safety commissioner.

As Atlanta World Editor C.A. Scott remembered it, the need for Black police officers became a pressing issue in 1934 with the increasingly high homicide statistics almost exclusively in the Black community.

Eventually a pamphlet was published entitled "Wanted: Negro Police" that stirred the consciousness of many officials in public office.

Retired Sergeant Henry - Hooks who spent 26 years on the police force remembered the hardships of working on a force that discriminated both in hiring and promoting and said even if the Public Safety Commissioner Reginald Eaves were guilty of misconduct in cheating allegations on the force, "he wouldn't be doing anymore than any other officer."

Both Lyons and McKibbens echoed sentiments of being "disrespected and resented".

Some 200 guests were pre-

sent at the awards fete at the Hyatt-Regency. Other participants included Atlanta NAACP Executive Director Jondell Johnson, Community Coordinator Ozell Sutton and Public Safety Commissioner Eaves and pastor of ZION Baptist Church Rev. Robert L. Johnson.

Musical selections were rendered by Liz Spraggins, Robin Brown and the Atlanta Movement Choir.