

Atlanta's First Black Police Sworn In This Month In 1948

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From Segregation To Leadership

Atlanta's First Black Police Sworn In This Month In 1948

BY GEORGE M. COLEMAN

Pioneers, those people who pave the way for a more affluent society, are often forgotten in a world that profits from their honorable endeavors.

And the setting up of annual public remembrances seldom helps, for each individual on this earth of ours is far too busy trying to survive in this troubled world of ours.

But a feeling that silently cries "remember me," came alive the other day during a conversation with Ernest M. Lyons, who perhaps was the first black Atlantian to have the desire to be a policeman beating in his breast.

Mr Lyons, who graduated from Washington High School with this writer in 1939, has become a virtual

watch dog on reminding our new citizens of Atlanta's fabulous black history, and how things were fought here to make the great city that new residents and visitors find when they arrive here.

Atlanta was ruled by laws of segregation on March 8, 1948, when eight young men were sworn in by former Chief of Police Herbert T. Jenkins, one of the few white officers open-minded enough to work with changing ideals and attitudes.

Those left among that original eight remember the evening vividly.

"It was a rainy Monday night," H.H. Mooks, who later to become an outstanding detective recalled.

"It was raining like h--l." Lyons declared.

And that rain was to be a symbol of the "h--l" that eight black men would catch over the next several years as they worked in a situation where there were many who would use any excuse to dishonor them in an effort to show that the American Negro was not worthy of overseeing the laws of this city.

Now, 38 years later, after the city has had three black public safety commissioners, and one black police chief, it will seem an exaggeration to citizens who have not lived here that long.

Buy Lyons several years ago, gave a vivid example of how black people were treated under southern white police rule.

"A white officer would be taking a black person up the stairs, not too gently. He (the arrested person) would turn to the officer, and ask, 'What have I done? I've got the right to know.' ...The white officer would push him around and exclaim, 'Nigger, you ain't got no rights.'"

"If a white woman was arrested, they called a special car to take her to jail. If a Negro woman was arrested, she was thrown right in

with the men, black or white.

"If we arrested somebody, the white driver would park across the street and holler, 'Okay, bring that nigger over here, boy.'"

This was the kind of sickening situation the first black officers found themselves in, and it would get worse before it got better.

PROUD GROUP

The eight black officers, who by law, could not arrest whites; could not work out of the Police Station, or wear their uniforms to work, to court or off duty, gathered in the basement of the Butler Street YMCA on May 2, 1948, and walked up Auburn Avenue, as a black law abiding citizens cheered, and those outside of the legal status, apparently saw their sometime protection by white officers fall into jeopardy.

Fifty seven black citizens had been allowed to take the test, while knowing that only eight would be accepted.

They were: Willie T. Elkins, (now deceased); Willard Strickland, (living in New York City); John Sanders, Jr. (deceased); Robert McKibbens (retired); Ernest Lyons, (retired); Johnnie P. Jones, (living in Savannah); Henry H. Hooks (retired) and Claude Dixon (deceased).

There would be others to be hired a short time later, including John D. Hudson, now city prison chief; Billy McKinney, now a member of the Ga. House, Clarence Perry, and Howard Baugh. But they were not the first, the eight men who had to brave the mammoth insults of those first few months.

That night that they were sworn in, Chief Jenkins told the eight men:

"It'll take time for the citizens, both white and colored, to get used to you, for you will be a novelty to Atlanta."

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First Black Officers of the Atlanta Police Dept., March 10, 1948

From left: Johnny Jones, Willard Strickland, John Sanders, Jr., Willie T. Elkins, Robert McKibbens, Henry Hooks, Claude Dixon, and Ernest Lyons. Photo by W.A. Scott III.

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Jenkins then sought to learn if any of the men had been intimidated. This took place on March 2 after they had been accepted as the eight who would later be sworn in.

THE CIVILIAN VOICE

The eight black officers were actually hired after months of struggles between Atlanta's black and liberal forces and the city's Board of Aldermen, (now called City Council).

And when Alderman Ralph Muic introduced a resolution on Dec. 4, 1947 to employ black policemen, the controversial compromise that many will question today had been worked out.

It was termed a practical solution; one that faced certain defeat if limitations on black police powers had not been agreed to. It caused a continuous flurry of protest from black leaders, and change was made in several moves, without announcement until blacks held high positions without the white public being forewarned.

Efforts began in 1945 after the defeat of the white primary, which opened the doors for black politicians who would come upon the scene a few years later.

The crusade was launched in 1936 by C.A. Scott, through the pages of the Atlanta Daily World, while the late Prof. C.L. Harper put together a coalition of leaders that included: The Rev. M.L. King, Sr., John Wesley Dobbs (Mayor Jackson's grandfather), The Rev. William H. Borders, L.D. Milton, Atty. A.T. Walden, white citizens, Walter Paschal, Atlanta Journal, J.C. Steeler, Jr. Chamber of Commerce, Rev. Harrison McMains, First Christian Church William Stafford, CIO.

These men battled for months to get some type of agreement that would get blacks into the dept. as a starter. They ran into a solid wall where whites in power insisted that the white race must continue with power over the black race, and the aldermanic board refused to budge until concessions were made.

Blacks today may question such tactics, but those who forced open the door will tell you it was a hard road, but worth the effort.