

*Civil Rights History Project*  
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Interviewee: Reverend Doctor Harry Blake  
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Interviewer: David Cline  
Videographer: John Bishop  
Length: 01:10:22

David Cline: I'm just going to record a little brief announcement just for the tape, so we have a record of that, and then we'll just start talking. So, are you ready?

Harry Blake: Ready!

David Cline: Fantastic!

John Bishop: You're on.

David Cline: Okay. Today is October the third, 2013. We are in Shreveport, Louisiana, in the beautiful sanctuary of the Mount Canaan Baptist Church with the Reverend Doctor Harry Blake. Good morning.

Harry Blake: Good morning. Good to have you here.

David Cline: Thank you so much.

Harry Blake: Welcome to the hood. [Laughs]

David Cline: [Laughs] Thank you, thank you. This is David Cline talking, of the Virginia Tech History Department, and also working with the Southern Oral History Program at UNC-Chapel Hill. And we are here on behalf of the Civil Rights History Project of the National Museum of African American History and Culture of the Smithsonian and the Library of Congress. Behind the camera today is John Bishop of Media Generation and UCLA.

So, again, thank you so much for being part of this project. We really appreciate your time and your willingness to be part of this.

Harry Blake: Really, it's extremely gratifying to have you here.

David Cline: Well, thank you so much. Where I'd like to start, if you would, is if you could just tell us a bit about your upbringing and your people and where you came from.

Harry Blake: Okay.

David Cline: And we'll try and tie that into a conversation about the work you've done on behalf of African American people and the Civil Rights Movement.

Harry Blake: Good. My parents—my daddy was born in Mississippi, and my mother was born in Arkansas. And I was born in Arkansas, but being the land of opportunity, the first opportunity my parents got, they seized it and got me out of Arkansas and brought me to Louisiana, very, very young. My background is that of a plantation. My daddy was a sharecropper who could not read or write. I think my mother finished third grade.

So, I was reared and lived on a plantation. Having been born in 1934, I lived on a plantation until I was 24 years old, finished college. That was the year I finished college that I like to say I was liberated from the plantation. My wife liberated me from the plantation.

Went to a one-room church school. It was a public school. I guess you can describe it this way: the plantation owner established a school in a church building for first through seventh

grades. And that teacher was not really a college graduate. She was a college sophomore. She taught first through seventh grades, every subject, so obviously was not a lot she could do.

So, I was almost a teenager before I learned to read and write. I was promoted to junior high, I guess you would say, eighth grade, and that was my first encounter with the eight parts of speech and other things, because I was behind. But I struggled to catch up. And, as a matter of fact, my whole life has been a life of trying to catch up. And by the time I've caught up in this century, here comes technology, and [laughs] I'm behind again! And technology changes every week!

DC: We all feel that way. [Laughs]

HB: Yes, yes, yes, yes! I—this may not be meaningful—I plowed mules. Here I am, in high school, plowing mules. And I decided, for some unknown reason, that I was not going to learn the language of the mule. I was going to teach the mule my language. And mule language was, “Whoa! Haw! Gee!” And I discovered that it was not in what you said to the mule that got his attention. It was the pull of the reins. So, when I wanted the mule to stop, I just said, “Stop,” and I pulled on the reins. If I wanted him to go right, I said, “To the right,” and I pulled on the right reins. So, that's a humorous story, but it's true. I did not learn mule language. I had intelligent mules. I taught them my language.

DC: Hmm, um-hmm.

HB: That's the humor of it.

DC: What lesson did you learn there with the mules? How did you apply that later in life, if any way?

HB: Let me add this. My daddy taught me that there was a saying that, “You can lead a horse to the water, but that you can't make it drink.” My daddy said, [0:05:00] “If you know how

and put enough salt in his diet, he'll find water on his own." I learned a powerful lesson from that in my pastoral ministry. If I have a project, have a mission that the church does not see eye-to-eye, I salt the diet to make them thirst for what I'm trying to feed them. So, that has been very beneficial to me.

I learned also from this mule thing, if you know how, you can get people to do anything you want them to do. And I saw examples of that from Jim Jones and David Koresh. They took lettered people, unlettered people, rich people, poor people, and led them to do whatever they wanted them to do. Mr. Jim Jones even said to people, "Stand in line and drink poison," and they were anxious to do that. So, I think, as a clergy person, you've got to keep your motives right so you can lead people in a right direction. But those were some leadership skills that I kind of learned from the plantation and from life.

DC: Um-hmm. And when were you called to the church?

HB: My pastoring—early years of my pastoral days were in the rural community. And in this—

DC: I should just pause and ask you where exactly was the plantation, if you could tell us about that, what county it was?

HB: Okay. The first—I've lived on two plantations. One was in northeast Louisiana, in Madison Parish, Tallulah, Louisiana, and the name of that plantation was the Ashley Plantation. Left there in 1951 and moved to northwest Louisiana, Shreveport, Caddo Parish, and the plantation north of Shreveport was the Woodspur Plantation. And that's the plantation that I was liberated from. I went to college and after I finished college, moved to the city limits of Shreveport.

So, my first pastorage was in 1958 in Caddo Parish, a one-Sunday church. And that was a tradition of the rural areas. Churches did not meet every Sunday. Some churches met every other Sunday, for instance, first and a third Sunday, or a second and fourth Sunday. So, my first church was a one-Sunday church, first Sunday. And then I was called to a church closer to Shreveport, almost in the city limits. It was a first Sunday evening and a third Sunday morning church. Got called to that church. And then, I got called—just on the line of Texas, called Bethany, Louisiana, I got called to a second and fourth Sunday church.

By 1966, I was able to turn those two rural churches full time and to satisfy my conscience, I left both of those churches, because I didn't want to go to one or the other, and came to this church, which was 1966. This church was in the most densely populated slum area of Shreveport called Allendale. And I came here.

Unfortunately, this church was not, in a sense, as advanced as my rural churches, because we had air conditioning in the rural church and pews. This church did not have air conditioning at the time, nor pews. We had benches and all that good stuff. The building that I inherited was so dilapidated that I think a few years after I was here, it actually collapsed and fell in. And this is the result of that building having been so dilapidated. So, I've been here since 1966. What, 47 years this year.

DC: Amazing. Wonderful. So, let's talk a little bit about—well, let me ask you first, growing up on the two plantations, [0:10:00] what was it like for African American people in that time, as far as opportunities available and as far as relationship with white people?

HB: Let me respond to the last part of that question: relationship to white people. This is interesting, and a lot of people don't know this or may not agree. Whites and blacks in a confined, narrow sense had great relationships. For instance, if you were the white man's "boy,"

you got whatever you needed, with certain restrictions. I remember when World War II, if you were a good worker on the plantation, you didn't get drafted to the military. One reason is that the farmers were on the draft board or whatever it's called, and if his Negro's name came up, got set aside.

I remember this expression. They would say at the end of the week, when you got that day off to go to town, he'd tell you, "Have a good time. If you stay out of the cemetery," meaning don't get killed, "I'll keep you out of jail." That meant you could kill another Negro, you could do whatever you want, just so you don't get into the black, or white area. "I'll get you out of jail." That's the kind of relationship. Whites and blacks, in a confined sense, got along very well. The southern white man—I think perhaps even today, but in my younger years—would do anything for "his Negro," so long as he felt like he was handing it *down* to him—

DC: Um-hmm.

HB: But not *out* to him, not on my—you will never be my equal. That's the way I describe the relationship.

DC: And as you say, "his Negro," so there's a sense of—

HB: That's right. You never forget you are mine. And we—and the people who lived on the plantation were really his Negro—and I'm using the language that was popular then, Negro—because if you were a sharecropper, he provided a hut, a house for you to live in. He provided the food for you to eat, because he had what they called a commissary, a country store, that he provided food and implements for farming and some clothing, work clothing. You got an advance on that. He would charge that to your account. You had to use his mules to work the crop and his implements, the plows, the cultivators. So, he charged that to your account.

Now, let's say you were able to grow 20 bales of cotton. Ten of those bales belong to the farmer, the owner. Ten belong to you, and you paid the expenses for making those 20 bales out of your income. And most of the time, at the end of the year, he would say to the plantation workers, "You did good this year. We broke even."

Now, you can't leave the plantation and go somewhere else. You could leave the plantation if another farmer paid him to let you move to his plantation. So, you were always indebted. You owed your soul to the company store. My daddy, fortunately—I don't know how he did it. I guess he must have found favor in the white owner. He always, every year, would make a profit, maybe \$200, not more than \$500 a year.

And [0:15:00] how we got from northeast Louisiana to northwest Louisiana, the manager for the owner of the plantation was offered a job in north Louisiana, and he was allowed to bring as many of the Negroes from this plantation with him, but he paid the owner, so we owed him. And you never got out of debt. You were always in debt. And if I can sneak this in: America is very much on that style today, because they keep us slaves with credit cards.

Okay, you asked me another question that I didn't address. I don't remember what it was.

DC: Well, I asked about relations with white people. But just what it was like, I guess, within the black community as well at that time, how cohesive black communities were. And I also wanted to ask about if anyone was voting at that time.

HB: No, no, no, no, no! No one was voting. The plantation that I lived on, when I became 20 years old, no black person was registered. There might have been a handful of blacks in that part of Caddo Parish, Dixie—not Dixie, but—yeah, maybe Dixie, Belcher, might have been a handful. How I got registered at—I believe the age limit then was 21—how I got registered, I gave an address of a friend of mine who lived in the city limits as my address and I studied to

pass the test that was required in this state and in this parish. So, at 21, though I was still on the plantation, I became a registered voter.

DC: Hmm. And do you remember what that process was, what the test was, and going through that experience?

HB: Oh, yes! Oh, yes, how well I remember! First requirement, in order to even apply, you had to have a registered voter to identify, prove that you were who you said you were. Now, if only whites are registered, what white person is going to vouch for you?

DC: Okay.

HB: There were a few who would do that. The other requirement was you had to have identification, driver's license or Social Security card. And now, you have to pass a test. What's the test? Interpret the Constitution, U.S. Constitution, to the satisfactory of the voter registrar, and a Harvard lawyer couldn't do that. Okay?

If you pass that, now you've got to figure your age, how old I am today in years, in months, and days. And if you pass that test, they may give you a card. That was true in Louisiana. In Texas, of course, you had to pay a poll tax and all that kind of thing.

DC: Um-hmm. But it was—

JB: Let's pause.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're back.

DC: It only takes a second. So, the—yeah, so it was an incredibly difficult barrier to pass.

HB: Incredibly difficult, incredibly difficult. And that was part of my responsibility when I joined Martin Luther King's staff was to get, to teach voter education, teach people how to pass



the test, and to compute their age, in terms of years, days, months, to the date that they were applying to get registered.

DC: Now, speaking of Dr. King, of course, could you tell us the story of how you felt drawn to fight for civil rights and how you met Dr. King and his organization and began working with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference?

HB: Though my daddy could not read and write, my daddy, as I think about it, was gifted in that he knew how [0:20:00] to work the system. [Laughs] He, coming up in his era, he knew he had to pay homage to the white man. He'd call him "Cap'n" and "Boss" and what-have-you. But he knew how to get what he needed to survive.

He said this to me one day, he said, "You can call a white man a dog, if you know how, and get by with it." My daddy always did his teaching by demonstration. The boss bought a new car, and my daddy walked by the car and said, "Cap'n, this is a *beautiful* car. You know you're a big *dog*!" [Laughs] Called him a dog! He liked it, but he knew *how* to call him a dog.

So, I saw my daddy using techniques to get what he needed to get, but never diminished his manhood. He never did that. So, my daddy taught me how to be a man and a proud man, even in the midst of segregation and on the plantation. So, I knew what I saw happening in America, particularly where I lived. Something was wrong with that. And there became a burning inside of me and a yearning to see what I could do to change this.

I had a wonderful experience about ninth grade. This is not on the plantation. This is in the little town of Dixie. There were two stores in Dixie and a railroad station. I went to—it must have been the summer of '52, maybe, '51 or '52—to one of the store owners and said to him, "I'd like to have a summer job." His name was H.L. Whitlow.

He said to me, “Well, boy, I just hired two students.” They were both college students, one white, one black. “And my brother-in-law is working with me this summer, and I don’t need anybody. I wish you had come sooner.” Well, as I was leaving the store, his wife said, “Hey, boy, come here! I’m going to talk to my husband about hiring you. I like you.” Well, he said to me, “Well, I really don’t need you, but because my wife likes you, be here Monday morning, and I’ll try you out.”

I was working on the plantation in the field, and we would go chop cotton, pick cotton. We’d go to the field at seven o’clock, get off at five, five days a week. Well, when I got this summer job at the Whitlow store, I had to be there for five-thirty in the morning, because the field hands would stop at his store on their way to the field to get their, buy their lunch, so I needed to be there during the rush hour.

H.L. Whitlow was far ahead of his time as a white man. He practiced in the ’50s equal employment opportunities. He had a white student from Tech working for him that summer, and a black student from Grambling. However, the white student worked in the store, but the black student was a maid in the house. Well, to make a long story short, he told me, “I’m going to try you out, and if you—don’t ask me what I’m going to pay you. I’ll pay you whatever you’re worth.”

Well, at the end of the week, he applauded me. He said, “You’re a good worker. I like you and I want to keep you on.” Now, on the plantation, five days a week, a few hours [0:25:00] per day less, I would make \$15 a week. Now, I’m working six days at the store, start at five-thirty in the morning, get off at seven at night. And he said, “I’m going to start you off with \$15.”

I said to him, “You know, I could have worked one day less, and a few hours less, and made \$15. And you did say you were going to pay me what I was worth. You said you liked my work. But if that’s all you think I’m worth, I’m going to donate this week’s work to you,” and gave it to him, gave it back.

And he said to me, “Well, what in hell do you think you’re worth?” And I said, “Well, sir, you couldn’t pay me what I’m worth, but I wouldn’t work for a penny less than \$25 a week.” And he counted out ten more dollars and, as my mama would say, “chunked” it at me, threw it at me. Well, it was what I asked for, I didn’t mind him throwing it at me. I just got what I wanted.

Well, the fortunate thing is, for me, was he took sick at the end of the summer. Now, his college students have gone back to school. He sends his wife to my daddy’s house and say, “The school house that Harry would catch at his house comes by the store. Let Harry drive, before he goes to school, your car, and work an hour before school and work after school, and we’ll make it worthwhile.” Well, I’m part time in school, and he pays me \$25 a week.

Now, the next summer, he can’t pay me \$25 a week, and the next summer I was paid \$40. When I finished high school, I was making \$300 a month, and no black citizen in the rural was making that kind of money.

H.L. Whitlow and my daddy were the two most influential men in my life. He was called by his white friends a “nigger-lover” because he believed in treating people fairly. And he made such an impression on my life that I still talk about him.

DC: Um-hmm. Do you think he ran a risk doing that?

HB: Oh, yes, he did. He ran a risk. He did. But he was a Christian and he had money. And in America, money talks.

DC: So, he could get away with it?

HB: He could get away with it, yes.

DC: So—

JB: Pause.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We're back.

DC: So, if you see that as a, you know, crucial part in your journey about how people treat one another and the rights and how to demand the rights, what would be the next step in that journey?

HB: Let me add this, and then I'll answer the question. I remember, [laughs] I remember this senior-age white farmer came to the store one day—Whitlow's store. He was the postmaster. The post office was housed in his store. And at lunchtime, he closed the post office to go and eat. And I was out sweeping the stoop of the store, and this white guy saw me, and he said, "Hey, boy! Is the post office open?" He was asking me whether Whitlow had gone to lunch.

And I thought about it, I had to think fast, quickly, "Now, I am a boy by age, but I'm not the kind of boy he's calling me. And thirdly, I'm not *his* boy. There's no law on the book that requires me to respond to him. Now, if Whitlow called me a boy, he signs the check. He has to pay to call me boy. I'll answer to his 'boy.'" And I didn't say anything.

So, he came over to me and touched me on my shoulder and said, "Hey, boy. Is the post office open?" I didn't say a thing. He went in the store. Whitlow was there. He says, "Whitlow, where you find that damn deaf and dumb nigger?" [Laughs] I laugh about that. He was so dumb he didn't know that I wasn't deaf. I guess what I'm trying to say is I resisted the system in my way and got by with it. And that was my [0:30:00] early beginnings to kind of fight the system.

DC: Um-hmm. And as you say, your father was the model for that.

HB: He was. He was the model. You asked me another question, and I forgot to answer.

DC: So, what would be the next step, then, I guess, in your journey?

HB: The next step was I was very attentive to what was happening in Montgomery, Alabama. As a matter of fact, maybe 1954, '55, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Dr. T.J. Jemison had already staged a successful bus boycott. Martin King knew about that and came to Baton Rouge to model the Montgomery boycott by what had happened in Baton Rouge.

Well, I watched and I read Martin King's book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, and was impressed with him. It just so happened I went to a small black church college in Marshall, Texas, Bishop College, and Martin King was my commencement speaker.

The local civil rights leader here that I call, we call, the father of the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. C.O. Simpkins, was on Martin King's board of directors, and he asked Martin to interview me when I graduated and hire me to work in the Louisiana southernmost area. And in February of 1960, Martin invited me, Dr. King invited me to Atlanta to interview me, and hired me on his staff. That was my first connection with him.

DC: Um-hmm. So, that was February 1960?

HB: February of 1960. I started to work here in Shreveport on March 1<sup>st</sup>. I was arrested the first time March 1<sup>st</sup>.

DC: The first day?

HB: First day! [Laughs] First day. And it's interesting. I had taken a member downtown. They had a medical arts building where doctors' offices were. And I was sitting in my car, waiting on them to come. And a policeman on a motorcycle came up and said, "Boy, you know where the jailhouse is?" "No, sir. I've never been in jail. Why would I know?"

He summons three, two other policemen. They escorted me to the jail. Asked, "Where's the chief?" "He's gone to lunch." "Well, what should we do with him?" "Take him up," and I guess they call it booking. They handcuffed me, I mean, fingerprinted me and took my mug and all that good stuff.

And finally, the chief came. They put me on the elevator with the chief. And the chief took me to his office and said, "You have a bright future in Shreveport. You just graduated from Bishop College, and you're a young minister. You've got a rural church up there. And I want to advise you not to ruin your future by fooling with that damn communist, Martin King." And he gave me this advice, and finally he said, "Now, what are you going to do?"

And I said, "Well, Chief, as soon as you release me, I'm going back and going to work." And he said, "Okay, lock him up!" Said, "What shall we charge him with?" "Oh, hell! Charge him with careless and reckless." So, my first offense was careless and reckless driving, and neither police officer had seen me drive.

DC: You were sitting in a parked vehicle.

HB: In a parked vehicle, and had been sitting there for 30 or more minutes before he came along. I was arrested I don't know how many times. I didn't see that as something to be glamorous with. I'm one of four children. My daddy never went to jail, and none of my siblings went to jail, and there I am, breaking that record. So, I didn't keep up with it.

The other most memorable arrest was the last time Dr. King was in Shreveport. His executive director, Dr. Wyatt Tee Walker, and I, we had this service where King was preaching. The Ku Klux Klan protested the service, so they were marching in front of the church. And we went out. And the young NAACP Youth group [0:35:00] were counter-protesting the Ku Klux Klan.

So, Dr. Walker and I went out to see what was happening. And the chief told us, “Go back into the church!” And Dr. Walker said, “America is free. We can stand wherever we choose to stand.” And, of course, I’m southern-born, southern-bred, and don’t know that I would have said that. And I made an attempt to go back. And he said, “Stay here, Harry Blake, with me.” And they arrested us, put us in jail for “mental observation.” Well, we stayed there, I think, 36 hours.

And many years afterward, Dr. Walker invited me to his church in Harlem, and he introduced me, “This is my friend, Harry Blake. When I was in Shreveport, we got arrested for ‘mental observation,’ a charge for which he has not been cleared yet!” [Laughs]

DC: [Laughs] So, why do you think they, I mean, brought that? What a bizarre charge! Right? So, why do you think they did that?

HB: Well, they couldn’t get anything else. And that way they could hold us. See, that was all about intimidation. That was also all about seeing if they could dig in your background and find something, or could they create stuff to get—and so, the best thing they could create on me was that I was affiliated with the communists, Martin King and Dr. C.O. Simpkins, who was here in Shreveport. We were getting our orders and instructions from Moscow, because we—as Negroes, you were too dumb to think, had to have somebody to think for you.

I came on the staff March 1<sup>st</sup> 1960. October 12<sup>th</sup>, there was an assassination attempt on my life. I was driving from my rural church on a two-lane highway, and a car behind me, I thought, was pulling into the left lane to pass. And I heard this noise. I thought he had thrown a rock, but they had shot in my car. And at the split-second the bullet came, I leant forward to adjust my radio, and the impact of the glass from the bullet tore four holes in the coat I was wearing.

I pursued the car so I could get the tag number and report it to the sheriff. Reported it to the sheriff, and the sheriff said some days subsequent to that that the owner of the car said he was bowling at that time, so he couldn't have shot at me. And that's all that was done.

DC: And that's how justice worked?

HB: That's how justice worked. I don't know if I—

DC: Well, let me ask another question, because you said that Dr. Wyatt Tee Walker— what he said when you were standing out there maybe wasn't quite what you would have said. And I just sort of want to ask about, you know, there's the South and there's how whites treated blacks in the South, far from universal. So, did—the question I want to ask is did SCLC sort of— really knew what they were getting into—?

HB: Oh, yes!

DC: In this part of southwest Louisiana?

HB: Oh, yes! Yes, yes. I'm assuming they did, because Alabama was equally as bad, Mississippi. However, the Civil Rights Commission said in their report that Shreveport was the most difficult city in the South. We didn't have the Emmett Till, Medgar Evers, but we had what we had to keep Negroes under control. Because Shreveport was basically a plantation environment, so those of us on the plantation were disciplined mentally to kind of be obedient. So, when he said to me to go back in the church, I had seen what I needed to see, so I would have gone back. But Dr. Walker, from a different situation, resisted. So, I stood with him, and we both got locked up in jail.

DC: Um-hmm. Now, did you [0:40:00] find support or any reluctance for support from your parents or from your church when you got involved?



HB: Well, here's what I did. I went to my parents when I decided to accept Dr. King's invitation. I went and said to my dad and mom, "The job that I'm going to take may result in my death or injury. But not only that, it may result in your injury or death, because I'm your child. I want to apologize for putting you in that position. But you raised me and made me the kind of person that I am." And my daddy said, "I'd be disappointed if you did anything different."

And my siblings—my siblings are younger than I—they tell me now the kind of treatment that my daddy got. If the policeman saw him anywhere, he stopped him and called him dumb, "you stupid-ass nigger," and what-have-you. And my daddy never responded. When they got through with him, he got back in his car and went on. So, he went through great humiliation because of me that he never shared with me. My siblings, after my daddy's death, shared that with me.

DC: Now, did you ever have the chance to talk with them and celebrate at all about some gains that were made?

HB: I don't know if this answers your question. When I helped my daddy to pass the voter test, that was the celebration, that he got a chance to vote in his lifetime. One thing that haunts me that I never did. It pains me so that I struggle to restrain my tears. I never taught my daddy to write his name, and I could have done that. But he was a man of morals and courage.

DC: Um-hmm. And jumping ahead again, I understand that you did run into some, quite some violence yourself as part of the Movement.

HB: Yeah.

DC: If you wouldn't mind talking about that.

HB: The girls who were killed in Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, September fifteenth, 1963. President Kennedy declared the next Sunday a day of mourning. The civil rights leaders

suggested that we would have memorial services in our communities that Sunday, September twenty-second. I went to—our form of government then was a commissioner form of government. I went to the Commissioner of Public Safety to get a permit to have a march from Booker Washington High School to the closest church, Little Union. I think I went to the commissioner that Tuesday. He said, “I’ll get back with you.”

Saturday noon, he summons me to his office and said, “Permit denied.” Well, the next day, the service was going to be held, and the march. Then, he asked me, “Well, what are you going to do?” I said, “Well, Commissioner, you had five or six days to make your decision, and you want me to make mine in five or six minutes. You will see Sunday what I’m going to do.” He said, “Well, let me tell you, *anybody* in Shreveport participates in a march, I will arrest *every* person participating.” “Commissioner, you do what you have to do.”

I knew he meant that. I didn’t want, if I can use this expression, innocent people participating in the march, getting arrested, losing their jobs. So, here’s what we did, low-key. We got the word out, “Meet at the site where the march was to begin.” And they did. We told them, “Just go on to the church. We’ve canceled the march.”

But by that time, the commissioner was prepared. And there were policemen, [0:45:00] law enforcement people, all over this community, looked like by the thousands. They were on horses, with bayonets, and had garbage trucks to haul the people that they were going to arrest. And it looked like there were literally thousands of black folk who showed up for the march. But they didn’t show up for the march. They were amazed at what was happening, so they came out of their houses on the streets, looking. And you may have scenes from that; if you don’t, we’ll share them with you so you can see them.

But at the close of the service, a lawyer, Dr. Turney Stone, went to the commissioner and said, "Now, Commissioner, we need to get out of the church." He said, "Well, the only way you can get out, you come out two by two." Well, at that time, the white citizens group, the Ku Klux Klan were outside marching and protesting.

I went out of the vestibule to see what was going on. The service was over now. And I met the commissioner and two other policemen in the vestibule. And they manhandled me and began to beat me inside the vestibule of the church, drug me on the outside, and every policeman who could get close enough to get a piece of my head with his nightstick beat me until they thought I was dead or appeared to be lifeless, and they left me laying on the lawn on the sidewalk. That was September twenty-second, 1963.

And my wife was fearful, my family was fearful of me getting medical attention from the white doctors. Flew me to Dallas. And the young people at the high school decided something needed to be done, and they began protest movement. And that's where the police beat them, teargas-bombed them, went to the school, manhandled the principal, hit and arrested a white teacher. And Shreveport went into the greatest movement, I guess you could say, protest movement, that it had experienced during that week. And, of course, two weeks ago, we just finished the celebration of the 50 years.

DC: Fifty years of that movement?

HB: Um-hmm.

DC: Yeah, yeah. I mean, that sounds like outright war, at that point.

HB: If you don't have access to the pictures, we'll let you see them. It looked like a war zone.

DC: Um-hmm. So, how did that play out, then, in the coming months? And what about your own recovery? I imagine that took some time.

HB: Well, the president of my school that was in Marshall had moved to Dallas, Texas, Bishop College. And that president of the school put me in faculty housing until I recovered and came back to Shreveport, with my wife and two children at that time. Um—

DC: So, yeah, if you could just tell us about how the Movement then went on, starting with such a violent beginning.

HB: Well, here's the way I interpret it. Remember I'm saying it was students. Parents knew that Commissioner D'Artois was a violent man, and he had full control of Shreveport. He was the power. Even white folks feared him. And black parents didn't want their children killed or hurt, so they found a way to kind of quell that within a week or two. And one way, one thing they did, they arrested students.

There's a guy in this city who was a student. [0:50:00] The Commissioner decided—he has to make somebody the leader as an example—decided he was the leader. They put him in jail. And I believe he tells it he stayed in jail either 32 or 42 days. He could not go to a school, public school, in the city. I think he moved to New Orleans. But, at any rate, 50 years later, they did grant him a high school diploma, but he had finished school somewhere else and college.

As a matter of fact, 40 years subsequent to the day that I was beaten, the city did—and I'll show it to you on the wall—a public proclamation of apology for what had happened to me.

JB: [Coughs]

DC: Do you want to pause for a second?

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're back.

DC: So, where did the Movement locally then go from there? What change did you want to see, did you demand in Shreveport?

HB: I think what really happened, [clears throat] I think in the inner recesses of my soul, I had to analyze that—and I understood why, though—not one single adult in this city made a public protest of what happened to me. [Pause] So, as I reasoned that, to keep from getting resentful and bitter, I rationalized. Not one adult called a meeting and said, “Harry Blake, we want you to be our civil rights leader.” So, I voluntarily put myself in harm’s way.

And the commissioner was—he didn’t play. Here’s what he did. If we had a rally, he would send somebody in, wired to tape it, and any black person who spoke, it was recorded. For instance, if they worked in a company or for the school board, they were sent to the superintendent, and the superintendent was directed to fire them. He went for the jugular.

So, I decided I can, after that, I can still fight for freedom in a different way, because protests were kind of dying out at that time, in 1963. And I tested myself. I went, [laughs] I went to the school board to apply for a teacher’s job. And white folk in the South are smart: “Give him a job, and he can’t work for us and do all this stuff that he’s doing in the Civil Rights Movement.” And I worked a couple of years. I told them I would not sign a contract, because I didn’t want to be inhibited with my work here.

So, I got called to this church in ’66. I went to the commissioner and said to him, “Mr. Commissioner, I’m a new pastor in Shreveport. I know what you did to me at Little Union.” He said, “Let me stop you. I didn’t do anything to you. I didn’t touch you.”

I said, “Well, we’re not going to argue about that, Commissioner. I want you to do me a favor. I am a new pastor. There are things I want to get done in the Allendale community. I’d like to have your support. But before you pledge your support, I want you to know *anything* I’ve

done in the past, should I deem it necessary to repeat, I will.” He said, “Well, you know, Reverend Blake, I haven’t always agreed with your methods, but I’ve always had respect for you. What can I do for you?”

And I went to the mayor and said the same thing to the mayor. And the mayor said to me, [0:55:00] “Reverend Blake, I’m a politician. Do you remember each time you were arrested what judge you went before?” I said, “Judge Whitmire.” He said, “That was by design. I told them and told the judge what he couldn’t do to you. I’m a politician. I couldn’t come out. I know the Movement was right and just, but I’m a politician. What can I do for you?” I said, “Mr. Mayor, anything I’ve done in the future, should I deem it necessary to repeat—.” He said, “I understand that. What can I do for you?”

And I showed him the condition of my church, but I also showed him the condition of this community. There were outdoor operative privies, toilets, in this community when I came in ’66. “I want to build some housing for poor people. And the city owns eight acres of land that’s supposed to be a park, but it’s never been developed. I want you to give that to my church to build housing.” He said, “The city can’t sell property, but give me a little time.”

He had an ordinance passed that said that “said property shall be sold to Mount Canaan Baptist Church for \$35,000, and the use of the property is limited to housing, recreation, education, or religious purposes.” And we built, 40 years ago, a 120-unit housing for low-income families and a daycare center. And then, some 30 years ago, we built a high-rise senior citizens’ tower next to that building, a couple of blocks away. So, that’s what I started working on, helping to improve the community and helping with education, which is my passion.

DC: Um-hmm.

HB: I just did it in a different way.

DC: Um-hmm. So, if you could talk about how you see that kind of work—housing, senior citizen care, education, childcare—being part and parcel of the Movement.

HB: It is a part of the Movement, because people—you see, the Movement was targeted at the immoral things. It was immoral for me to pay bus fare and have to stand in the back when there's sitting room upfront. It was immoral for me to go—they didn't have Burger Kings then, but similar places, and I have to go around to the window and pick up my hamburger. It's immoral for a bus station to have a restroom and I can't go to it, or a water fountain I can't drink out of because it says, "White Only." That's one of the things the Movement was focusing on.

I may be the only person in America who sees it this way. I don't think Martin King—I know I didn't—we were concerned about the *kind* of integration we got, particularly in the schools. We weren't asking for them to integrate the schools, necessarily, but give the black school the same funding and the same capable teachers that you give to the white school. But the system in America is smart. They took control and gave us a kind of integration that we weren't looking for: bused us from our neighborhoods to the white schools and closed black schools. And still, the black schools that were left, still had inferior curriculum. In a sense—I may [be] the only person in America—in a sense, we got duped.

Now, [1:00:00] once you open up the hotels and the restaurants, if I don't have a decent income, I still can't go there. And that's where I've kind of begun to focus myself, to get stores to hire blacks in places. I like to tell this. I was a cashier in the Whitlow store in the '50s. I didn't go in the cigar box to make change. I went in the cash register. I was a cashier in the *country* ten or fifteen years before we got a black cashier in the city. So, that's why I keep going back to Whitlow. He helped me do stuff that even the city of Shreveport was not doing.

DC: So, how are your relations now with some of these people that [laughs] you went through all of this against or with?

HB: Well, obviously, the Whitlow guy, because he was 60-odd years old in the '50s, he's gone to heaven. I have a good relationship with whites. I have a good relationship. I'm not—I have no interest in, let's see how I can say this. I won't say I don't have an interest in politics. I have no interest in being a politician, holding a position, don't want that at all. But I do want to determine who gets the position. I would never want to be a mayor, because if you're a mayor, you're a one- or two-term mayor. But if you make mayors, you're a mayor every time you make one. That's my position.

DC: Um-hmm.

HB: I guess I answered your question.

DC: Yes. So, I mean, that does lead me to another one, which is: so, where is the source—where has been the source of black power in Shreveport, then? Is it in the churches, or is it elsewhere? And another way of asking that is: who have been your allies as you've worked on these issues?

HB: Uh, [laughs] I think if you ask other citizens, you'll get different responses. But, as I see it, the power has been in the black church and still is, because every Sunday morning you've got a captive audience and you can kind of mold and make in your area, your church, your community, what you want to see happen.

DC: You can salt the diet, as you say. [Laughs]

HB: Yeah, yeah. Exactly, exactly. Put a little salt in the diet, yes, yes.

DC: Yeah.



HB: When Martin King first came to Shreveport, during those years, blacks were fearful of his presence. It was only after he died that everybody, for the most part, saw him as the prophet. There were several churches who voted that he could not preach.

As a matter of fact, this church was vacant in the height of the Civil Rights Movement, during '61. My name came up as a candidate, and they voted, "Harry Blake is a good man. He's a good leader. But he may get our church bombed or burned." And they didn't realize that would have been a blessing, with the condition that church building was in. [Laughs] It was only after the Civil Rights Movement had taken a different direction that they considered and called me.

DC: Very interesting. Well, let's—this has been wonderful. And, I guess, let's start to wrap up. But if I may ask: so, what are you focusing on now?

HB: Focusing on going home and sitting down. [Laughs]

DC: [Laughs]

HB: I'll be 80 years old next year!

DC: You would not. Yeah.

HB: My focus now is: all over America, and it cannot be denied that the school system needs help, in trouble. And unfortunately for me, I've always tackled what appeared to be the impossible. When I read statistics [1:05:00] that the system decides by the time a black boy becomes fourth grade, depending on how he's performing, they determine how many prison cells to build. By fourth grade students! Black males in America are in trouble. So, it is incumbent upon me to have a ministry in my church to develop strong moral black men. That's where I'm going.

What do you do with the third and fourth grade boys? You teach them how to read. Do you start a school and compete with the public schools? I'm not sure that I want to do that. So,

three summers ago, I started a summer boys' academy. I remember—I think we've had up to 50 in that. One boy was on second grade reading level. And when we got through with him, he was on sixth grade reading level. So, I know it can be done.

There's a boy in this church named Walter, 12 years old, and I kept hearing that he can't read, he can't pass the fourth grade material. I said to my church, "We've got to help Walter." And I perhaps shouldn't have said this, but I said, "If this was a white church, we'd find a way to help Walter." And this church, this church, this church is so kind to me. They allow me to try anything that's going to help people and they underwrite it. I said, out of my frustration, "Let's homeschool him!" And somebody in the background said, "Homeschool him in your house, not mine!" [Laughs and claps]

So, that caught on! And I did some investigation. There's virtual schools. That's a term that I didn't even know about. And finally, there's a young woman in this church sympathized with my passion, said, "Pastor, I've been teaching in the system, Bossier, the other parish," I think she said for 33 or 35 years. "I hadn't planned to retire this year, but I will retire." And that was in July. "I will turn my papers in next week to come over here and help you with that school." And I'd like for you to see her before you leave, just meet her. She's here. And we have five boys in that school, and we'll take some more next year.

DC: And they come every day?

HB: Every day, from eight to three.

DC: So, you are homeschooling them in the church?

HB: Homeschooling them in the church! And the church allows me to do that. That's what's so great about Mount Canaan Church. They allow me to do silly, not silly, crazy stuff. And I generally make it work. *We* generally make it work.

DC: That's interesting that, even in the Movement, which was a mass movement, it was about one-on-one change and interaction.

HB: You got it.

DC: And here's an example of intervention at a personal level.

HB: Sure. You got it.

DC: Well, anything that we didn't cover that you want to add? I'm sure there's a lot.

HB: Oh, I didn't even want to do this! [Laughs]

DC: [Laughs] Well, I'm so glad you did! I mean, really.

HB: Ah, you better thank my secretary. "Daddy, you got to do this!" "For what?" "For posterity!" "I won't be here for posterity." I really wish I could think of something else that I need to say, other than Mount Canaan Church is right in the center of the hood, but making a difference in the hood, and they give me full range to bring about change.

DC: Um-hmm.

HB: The best thing to happen to me was this church in the hood!

DC: Wonderful. John, do you have anything [1:10:00] you wanted to ask?

JB: No, I think you—every question I had on the tip of my tongue, you've already answered.

DC: Fantastic. Well, thank you so much. We're—I can't even express how much we appreciate this.

HB: I do want you just to see this teacher.

DC: Absolutely! Absolutely!

HB: Okay.

DC: And I know some of the pictures that you were talking about, too, if we could look at them.

HB: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

[Recording ends at 1:10:22]

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Sally C. Council