

Sit-Ins Provided Frank McCain, Blacks Another Vehicle To Gain Rights



Reflections On The Civil Rights Movement: Frank McCain of Charlotte, one of four instigators of the sit-in movement in 1960, said he and three N.C. A&T classmates were determined to shake off second-class citizenship. "There is no mid-point for one who is trying to achieve a right that is unpopular. You've got to put your life on the line."

Photo/CALVIN FERGUSON

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It was that same anger that inspired McCain and three other students from N.C. A&T State University to stage the first sit-in protest at an F.W. Woolworth lunch counter Feb. 1, 1960.

"Actually the way I felt before the sit-ins started was that life really didn't mean anything for me. You know that old Negro spiritual that says 'I'd rather be dead and buried in my grave before I'd be a slave?' I really felt that way," he said. "I certainly didn't feel free. I certainly didn't feel I had the kind of manhood that I deserved. I didn't have much self worth. To me that's worse than death. Death would be a relief.

"I concluded one day that I was less than my parents and grandparents because here I was with many more opportunities than they and I belonged to NATO too -- no action, talk only. I couldn't justify that. So I had to find a way to get the belief that I deserve and the belief my father deserved and do something for the reposed and the souls of my grandfather and ancestors. I had a responsibility in this life and I should be ashamed to die if I don't leave any kind of contribution for the betterment

of this society. I would be a waste of somebody's time to be born."

McCain is still directing his anger into positive channels. He sees February as the best time to make sure the truth is told about the sit-ins and the movement in general.

"Every month to me is Black History Month. I seize the opportunity in February to make sure our past is not forgotten. And to hopefully tell our young people the real story," he said.

"I'm finding that most of the magazines and periodicals are so unreliable in terms of telling our truths. If our truths are to be told, I think it's up to us to tell it. History for the most part is really the result of a group of white men who got together and said this is how we want it to be.

"People ask me if I was in Greensboro at A&T when Jesse Jackson came to start the sit-ins. That doesn't particularly bother me, but it's a misconception about what really happened. I'm also asked if the NAACP and CORE (Congress Of Racial Equality) had me on their payrolls to get this thing started. In fact, I'm told that by some people."

McCain, now employed as a

section leader at Hoechst-Celanese in Shelby, said there's also the notion that he and Ezell Blair Jr., Joseph McNeil and the late David Richmond jumped the gun.

"The other thing that keeps coming back to all of us is that 'You guys knew that they were planning to do something very similar to this in Nashville, Tenn. and you stole the idea from them.' The movement was supposed to start a week later in Nashville. They had done a lot of practicing and research work and we obviously heard about it and wanted to start something," he said.

"I really don't have a prob-

lem with that if people want to feel as though they had something going and it just happened to start in Greensboro. I take the position that we were not the first people to go into places where black people weren't supposed to go. I did it on my own two or three times as a young boy. I'm sure my father went into places where he was not supposed to go. I'm sure my grandfather tried to sit at the front of the bus or the train. In that respect I don't think that it was unique.

"I think the difference is one of vision and one of commitment. I was, along with the other four, ready to lay

down my life for the principle and the cause. I still am. Because of that, I was persistent enough to go back and get some changes made. I won't say that my father or my grandfather or the folk in Nashville weren't committed. I'll just say there's no proof. And all the folk that were tired and fed up before me. I think what was missing was vision and commitment.

"When you want to do something like this, it's all or none. There is no mid-point for one who is trying to achieve a right that is unpopular. You've got to put your life on the line."

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'Genial Gene' Was City's First Black Radio Star

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some featuring live gospel performances. Potts hosted some of the soul and gospel shows, which gained followings for the local groups he featured.

Listeners remember Potts for his ability to say things in rhyme during announcements and commercials. Listeners recall him saying, "Here's 'Stardust'; it's a must," and "We're setting the pace for others to trace."

Potts constantly mentioned people and events in the black community. He spotlighted residents' achievements and dedicated songs in response to call-ins. He also discussed events in the news, including the civil rights marches sweeping the South.

"We thought he was wonderful. He was confident and well-spoken, and he gave us a sense of pride," said Elizabeth Broom, an administrative assistant at Johnson C. Smith University.

Listeners loved Potts. "Gene was like a member of the family," George Parks recalled.

"He was a very generous man," Martha Williamson, a close friend said. "I remember when our church was purchased in 1949, and it needed to be renovated. Gene took it upon himself to pay for it entirely. He said he just wanted to do it for his church."

Potts was also known for helping students with scholarships and the less fortunate with food and clothing, often using his own money to assist people.

Potts was part of the Original Thirteen, composed of disc jockeys on the first shows aimed at blacks. Jack "The Rapper" Gibson of Atlanta started the group, and all but four members had shows on Southern stations.

Potts was born in Charlotte, attended Second Ward High School and graduated from Johnson C. Smith in 1933. After graduate school at Columbia, he became a teacher in the local schools and from 1939 to 1946 served as principal of Billingsville School, one of the largest all-black schools in the area.

Potts and his wife Ethel had no children. He retired from WGIV in 1975 and died in 1988 after a long illness. Friends held several fund-raising events to pay his medical bills and it was widely believed that WGIV had been stingy in its retirement provisions for its biggest celebrity.

Potts overcame racial barriers and paved the way for other black personalities on WGIV, including "Chattie Hattie" Leeper, "Rockin' Ray" Gooding and "Joy Boy" Sanders.

Leeper started to work at the station part time as a high school student in the mid-1950s. She was hired mainly to help Potts handle his huge volume of fan mail.

Today she laughs at her nervous fright the first time she was unexpectedly thrust on the air when an announcer failed to arrive on time. But soon she was filling in for Potts and the other disc jockeys regularly.

"Gene was like a mentor to the other announcers. He was older than we were, and we looked up to him," she said. "His enthusiasm quickly rubbed off on me."

Soon Leeper was a celebrity in her own right. She also was the manager of the Appreciations, a group of Johnson C. Smith students who made a few nationwide hit records before they disbanded to pursue other careers.

Gooding, who still does a Sunday night show carried on stations along the East Coast, became a celebrity on WGIV in the 1960s. He was on from 5 to 6 a.m. to warm up the audience for Potts, who came on at 6.

After a change in ownership, disputes rose between Potts and his fellow disc jockeys and WGIV's new management. The DJs moved to another station, taking many listeners and sponsors with them before the changes in station operations that followed the payola scandals.