

Abner Sessoms blazed historic trail

Ahoskie had state's first black cop

Abner Sessoms, the first black policeman not only in Ahoskie but also in North Carolina, was born in Powellsville and was one of nine children.

This is his story that he told the R.L. Vann School's Junior Historians in a 1982 interview:

I was raised on a farm went to Powellsville School, which is now C.G. White.

I think we went six or seven months a year to school. We had about four grades and two teachers. People went about like they wanted to go. If parents didn't make you go, you wouldn't go. We had to get our own wood to warm the school. We had a certain time during the day we would go out and cut wood and bring it up to the school house for the next day.

After I left the farm, I worked for the peanut company for years. Next I spent time working in Philadelphia, New York and Boston.

When I came back to the Ahoskie area, I worked at the Elks Hall and then Reynolds' Funeral Home.

At the time I also had opened a

cafe here and had that for about three years. I then opened a pool room and operated that for about seven years.

Hired in 1946

I was hired by the town of

and he gave my name. Others must have agreed. On the council at the time were Mr. John Garrett, Mr. Copeland and Mr. Basnight among others.

That night I was down at my

'I was treated fine when I was hired on the force. I did not apply to become a policeman; in fact, I didn't have any idea of being one.'

Abner Sessoms in a 1982 interview

Ahoskie as a policeman in 1946 when I was running the pool room. I worked for the department for 25 years and retired in 1970.

I was treated fine when I was hired on the force. I did not apply to become a policeman; in fact, I didn't have any idea of being one. I didn't even know that they were going to hire a black policeman, but

Rev. Patterson and Rev. Hart had been working on it. So the night the question finally came up, Rev. Hart was asked who he would sug-

gest and told me they wanted me at the police station. I asked why and the chief said they had decided to hire a black policeman tonight and they wanted me. I said I couldn't do it because I was running my pool room. He told me that I ought to come up there and take it because it might be my last chance.

I wasn't too interested but I went and talked to them about it. They told me they would start me at \$0 a month. At the time I was already

making \$25 a day in clear money. They encouraged me to take it, saying I could probably keep both jobs.

I did keep the poolroom for a while, because the building had been leased to me for three years. Another fellow ran it for me. I really didn't have anything to do with it, and on Saturday night he would bring me my part of the money.

Almost forced into job

I really had never given any thought to being a policeman. To tell you the truth, they almost forced me to accept it. They told me when the news leaked out that there would be black people against me and white people against me. They said if I accepted it that night, it would be settled and they wouldn't undo it. I decided to try it and I got along very well. They cooperated with me — the judges, magistrates, sheriff's department and the highway patrol. We were just one family, and they treated me nice.

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The Gallery Theatre

Audiences in Ahoskie and the Roanoke-Chowan area have enjoyed locally produced plays, musicals and dance competitions at The Gallery Theatre on Main Street.

Gallery Theatre enjoys 27th year

By Lottie Lassiter
The Gallery Theatre director

It seems only like a short time ago when a handful of individual saw the potential for something wonderful in an old movie house and created The Gallery Theatre, which is now enjoying its 27th year.

What was once a proud movie theatre that showed fine films and hosted outstanding vaudeville acts, was now an empty shell devoid of laughter, tears and drama that had entertained many residents of the Roanoke-Chowan community for decades.

The worn seats, floor and stage as well as the lobby were stark testimonials to the people who put their everyday lives behind them for an afternoon or evening of pure pleasure and fantasy.

The Women's Division of the Ahoskie Chamber of Commerce saw beyond the dust, decay and deterioration. What those women saw was a legitimate theatre and civic auditorium that would not only host visiting artists but provide a training arena for aspiring area thespians and artists.

After negotiating and signing a lease, the dream-makers held a membership, selling "stick" in a new non-profit organization, and The Gallery Theatre was born.

Stock sold in theatre

Individuals purchased shares of stock for \$25 each, thus making them lifetime members in the organization.

In this manner the community became an integral part of the ownership and not an outsider looking on this unique cultural center in the Roanoke-Chowan area.

Following several months of extensive clean-up and a few structural improvements to the building, volunteers then turned their sights to another labor of love — producing plays, sponsoring art exhibits (many times with the work of local artists) and other cultural events.

During this time, there was a succession of dedicated officers and Board members who kept activities moving through good as well as bad economic times. As funds be-

came available, small improvements were made. Then, exciting things began to happen for The Gallery Theatre Inc.

Theatre building bought

In 1980, opportunity knocked for what turned out to be a bonanza for the organization — the building that already gained a new lease on life was for sale. The officers and board of directors took their needs to the public again and, with the support of the Town of Ahoskie, raised funds to purchase the building. Two years later, Jan. 1, 1982,

The purpose of the theatre is to promote and advance cultural interest in living theatre, art, music and crafts.

the building officially became the property of The Gallery Theatre Inc.

With renewed enthusiasm and vigor, The Gallery began to restore the building. This effort was assisted handsomely in 1983 by a grant from the prestigious National Endowment for the Arts. This grant was used to develop a master plan of renovation and subsequent grants were utilized for implementation.

The lobbies were completely renovated, air-conditioning and heating systems were installed, a permanent sign was erected, and new stage wiring and an electrical sign board were added to the operational facilities of the theatre.

These improvements occurred in 1987-88 and were financed with grants and support, again from the theatre patrons and other community contributors.

A strong resurgence in volunteerism occurred in October 1985. It was the long-standing backbone of The Gallery. This came from the organization of Stagecraft and its active representation on the board of directors. The members of this

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A Historic Past... A Progressive Future



The Hertford County Commissioners

Seated: Vernice B. Howard, Chairperson; Standing, left to right: Ray Farmer, Dupont Davis, Robert Holloman and Mike Basnight

The Hertford County Board of Commissioners is constantly working to provide a better way of life for the citizens through quality education, health services, law enforcement, social and human services, animal control, solid waste, etc.

**Congratulations, Ahoskie
for 100 years of achievements toward
the growth of Hertford County**

HERTFORD COUNTY

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on your Centennial.

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