

Eye Witness to History

by Dexter Brooks,
Senior Resident Superior Court Judge

The office of High Sheriff of Robeson County has long been a place of the highest political importance in the county. In 1994 Glenn Maynor was elected to that position. It was an exciting time. He became the first non-white to be elected as sheriff. It was one of the highlights of my life. I was privileged to administer the oath of office to Sheriff Maynor at the Lumberton Court House. It was an appropriate setting for this historic event. Many people attended. Following are the remarks I gave on December 5, 1994 upon administering the oath of office to newly-elected Sheriff Glenn Maynor:

It is good to be here today on such a historic occasion. I would be remiss in my responsibility to do justice to this ceremony if I did not take a historical perspective in order to determine how we came to be here today and to examine the significance of this event to our county.

Some one hundred thirty-three years ago the Civil War was being fought in Robeson County as well as throughout the southern states of our nation. This war was fought over the question of whether black people should be citizens of these United States or whether they would continue merely to be considered as chattels or property owned by white people. The rights of Native Americans were somewhere in between the rights of European Americans and those of African Americans. Although Native Americans were not slaves, we were classified by the State of North Carolina as free people of color, meaning essentially that we had no rights of citizenship. For example, Native Americans did not have the right to vote, the right to bear arms, and the right to serve on juries. In other words, the system of justice was closed not only to African Americans but was closed likewise to Native Americans. The Civil War addressed such inequities in the civil and criminal justice systems.

During that time, there was a unique individual, Henry Berry Lowrie, who played a major role in determining the structure of present-day Robeson County and the rights that we enjoy today. When I say "we" I am speaking not only of Native Americans, but also of African Americans as well as European Americans.

After the war, during the period of reconstruction, the Ku Klux Klan was active all over the South, including Robeson County. Among the more dastardly acts perpetrated by the Klan was the taking of reprisals against persons who had cooperated with the Union troops moving through Robeson County. At least 20 people were murdered by the Klan by reason of their having served as guides for General William T. Sherman as his troops made their way through the then nearly impenetrable swamps of Robeson and adjacent counties. One was Ben Bethea, former slave who was beaten or hipped to death, and the other was Malcolm Sanderson who was Native American. Two Native Americans captured by the Klan were about to be ordered when one of the Indians, Andrew Strong, was able to escape. Strong carried the news of Sanderson's murder to Henry Berry Lowrie to the criminal authorities here in the county seat of Lumberton. One of the principals involved in the murders was James Taylor who was

then the leader of the Ku Klux Klan. After waiting an appropriate period of time to give the criminal justice system an opportunity to render justice in the murders and after it appeared that the criminal justice authorities were not going to take any action, Henry Berry Lowrie then took the only means that he had at his disposal to render justice in the murders. He became the instrument of justice and meted out the same justice to the leaders of the Ku Klux Klan as was administered by the Klan to Ben Bethea and Malcolm Sanderson. Within sight of an encampment of federal troops that were in Robeson for the express purpose of apprehending him, Henry Berry shot Taylor at point blank range with a shotgun. After killing Taylor and then calmly removing all valuables from the body, Henry Berry made his way back into the swamp with the troops in hot pursuit. Henry Berry never had to answer to anyone for that particular act or any other such actions because no one was able to kill or capture him.

The actions of Henry Berry should not be termed "crimes" because we must remember that unfortunately violence must remain the final option of all people who would remain free. As Thomas Jefferson, a patriot, once said "the tree of liberty must be refreshed and watered from time to time with the blood of patriots."

Henry Berry Lowrie had to act in his time with the only means he had at his disposal. But his actions assured that the Ku Klux Klan could not operate in Robeson County as they were able to do so otherwise throughout the State. He also assured that acts of violence such as those inflicted upon Ben Bethea and Malcolm Sanderson did not happen again. As a matter of fact, the Klan did not even attempt to operate in this county again until 1958 when they tried to hold a rally near the Town of Maxton and were routed by a host of armed Native Americans.

Henry Berry Lowrie played a major part in shaping Robeson County as we know it today. Another brave man later played a similar role in his time. The Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. had a major impact on Robeson County as we know it. During the time of Dr. King, although the Klan did not operate in Robeson County, there was in force in Robeson as well as throughout the State of North Carolina a system of so-called Jim Crow laws whereby African Americans and Native Americans were denied the right to vote, denied the right to participate in the political process, denied the right to serve on juries, and further denied numerous other constitutional and statutory rights that all of us take for granted today. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. galvanized the attention of the country on the injustices that people of color, African Americans as well as Native Americans, were having to endure throughout the South, including Robeson County. By virtue of the courage of the followers of this eloquent gentleman and because of their willingness to endure the violence that was inflicted upon them, they captured the conscience of the country thereby causing to be enacted a series of federal civil rights statutes, the most important of which was the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The Voting Rights Act invalidated the discriminatory laws that southern states, such as North Carolina, had utilized to prevent African

Americans and Native Americans from being able to exercise the right to vote thereby denying these same people the right to participate in the decision-making processes of this country and this state.

By virtue of the sacrifices of Dr. King, America is a better place to live for all of us. He willingly laid his life down on the altar, so to speak, because he knew that he was not going to survive the struggle for equality waged by the Civil Rights Movement. He did so willingly because he knew that people of color who came after him would be able to enjoy the rights that such people had been denied for generations.

Because of the sacrifices of Henry Berry Lowrie and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. the political system of Robeson County was transformed so that a candidate not of European descent, such as Glenn Maynor, can offer himself or herself for a public office and have a reasonable chance of winning an election for that office. Before 1988 I doubt that anyone could have reasonably expected a Native American or an African American can candidate to have had any great measure of success running for the office of Sheriff of Robeson County.

Federal court decisions have resulted in revolutionary change in the political system of Robeson County. The latest round of redistricting in 1991 has caused all of the boards that exercise power in Robeson County to become truly tri-racial. The Chairman of the Board of Elections and the Board of Trustees of Robeson Community College are African American. The Chairman of the Board of Education and the Board of Commissioners are Native American. This progress laid the foundation for the minority electoral successes that occurred this year.

Now, it is one thing to have the opportunity and it is quite another thing to have a person who is able to seize that opportunity and to realize a dream that is shared by many people. The election for sheriff was hotly-contested. Without making any statement as to the merits of the various candidates who offered themselves for the position, suffice it to say it took three separate elections to finally determine the sheriff of this great county. That individual is Mr. Glenn Maynor who is about to be invested with the great power of that position.

In other counties around the state, they have a sheriff, but in Robeson County we do things differently simply because we are different from any other county. Since we are so different I do not think you would be surprised if we did things differently when it comes to politics. In Robeson no racial group has a majority of the population or the elected voters so the political rules that apply in other places do not apply in Robeson

County. We have our own special ways of doing things. We have our own special offices, and instead of simply electing a sheriff, we elect a High Sheriff.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Sheriff of Robeson County and the sheriff of any other county in North Carolina, by virtue of being the sheriff, is the chief law enforcement officer of the county. In Robeson County, in addition to being the chief law enforcement officer, the sheriff is also the High Sheriff. When I use the term High Sheriff what I mean is that any person in Robeson County--no matter who they are and no matter what kind of problem they have--feels that they can go to the High Sheriff and get their problem solved. If they have petitioned the Board of Education, the Board of Social Services, the Health Board or the County Commissioners and not gotten satisfaction, regardless of the district in which they live, they know that they elected the High Sheriff. They know that the High Sheriff is the most powerful public officer in the county.

By virtue of the authority of that position--which goes back to the Sheriff of Nottingham in England and even further back--they can enlist his support and he will get on the phone and do whatever is necessary in order to see that justice is rendered on their concern.

I am happy to say to the citizens of Robeson County that we have elected the consummate law enforcement officer in the person of Mr. Maynor. I can now say that since Mr. Maynor is no longer a candidate so I am certainly not endorsing him for any public office. In any case he obviously did not need any such endorsement since he was successful in three elections. He is now the Sheriff-Elect of Robeson County. As such I would be remiss in my responsibility as the Resident Superior Court Judge if I did not speak well of our new Sheriff, Mr. Glenn Maynor. The voters, in their inherent wisdom, have elected the consummate jack-of-all-trades. You have elected a man as High Sheriff who is second to none in the State of North Carolina and in the great Democratic State of Robeson in getting things done for his constituents.

I would be remiss in my responsibility to do justice to this historic event if I did not note that Mr. Maynor is the first person to serve as Sheriff who is not of European descent. I say that not to say that makes him any better as an individual and I do not say that to say by reason of that fact he will serve even better in his capacity as sheriff. It was written in a local newspaper recently that the retirement of Sheriff Hubert Stone reflected the end of an era. When the oath of office is administered to Mr. Maynor, it will reflect the beginning of a new era in Robeson County when

any person--regardless of which racial group he or she happens to be a member of--can legitimately aspire to the highest position in this county and can be successful if they can convince the voters of the merits of their campaign. When I say convince the voters, I am not talking about the voters of any one particular racial group. I am speaking about the voters of all the racial groups that are present here today, because the reality of politics in present-day Robeson County is that if you cannot get a significant number of votes from all three racial groups, you are in serious trouble. This new era arrived in this election because--as far as candidates who are elected by all of us, that is not those who are elected by districts--we elected two Native Americans, two African Americans and two European Americans. First of all, we elected a Native American, Glenn Maynor, as Sheriff. We elected

a Native American, Mrs. JoAnn Locklear, as Clerk of Court. We elected John Carter, an African American, as District Court Judge. We elected Herbert Richardson, an African American, as District Court Judge. Judge Richardson also serves as Chief District Court Judge of this judicial district. We elected the European American community John-son Britt as your District Attorney, and J. Stanley Carmichael as one of your District Court Judges. We fellow citizens, unless my math fails me, I do not believe that we could have gotten any more racial balance than that even if we collectively expressly tried to do so.

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a Native American, Mrs. JoAnn Locklear, as Clerk of Court. We elected John Carter, an African American, as District Court Judge. We elected Herbert Richardson, an African American, as District Court Judge. Judge Richardson also serves as Chief District Court Judge of this judicial district. We elected the European American community John-son Britt as your District Attorney, and J. Stanley Carmichael as one of your District Court Judges. We fellow citizens, unless my math fails me, I do not believe that we could have gotten any more racial balance than that even if we collectively expressly tried to do so.

With those remarks, it is appropriate at this time for me to administer the oath of office to our new sheriff, Mr. Glenn Maynor. We are ready to begin a new era in our history.

Locklear, as Clerk of Court. We elected John Carter, an African American, as District Court Judge. We elected Herbert Richardson, an African American, as District Court Judge. Judge Richardson also serves as Chief District Court Judge of this judicial district. We elected the European American community John-son Britt as your District Attorney, and J. Stanley Carmichael as one of your District Court Judges. We fellow citizens, unless my math fails me, I do not believe that we could have gotten any more racial balance than that even if we collectively expressly tried to do so.

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Americans and Native Americans from being able to exercise the right to vote thereby denying these same people the right to participate in the decision-making processes of this country and this state.

By virtue of the sacrifices of Dr. King, America is a better place to live for all of us. He willingly laid his life down on the altar, so to speak, because he knew that he was not going to survive the struggle for equality waged by the Civil Rights Movement. He did so willingly because he knew that people of color who came after him would be able to enjoy the rights that such people had been denied for generations.

Because of the sacrifices of Henry Berry Lowrie and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. the political system of Robeson County was transformed so that a candidate not of European descent, such as Glenn Maynor, can offer himself or herself for a public office and have a reasonable chance of winning an election for that office. Before 1988 I doubt that anyone could have reasonably expected a Native American or an African American can candidate to have had any great measure of success running for the office of Sheriff of Robeson County.

Federal court decisions have resulted in revolutionary change in the political system of Robeson County. The latest round of redistricting in 1991 has caused all of the boards that exercise power in Robeson County to become truly tri-racial. The Chairman of the Board of Elections and the Board of Trustees of Robeson Community College are African American. The Chairman of the Board of Education and the Board of Commissioners are Native American. This progress laid the foundation for the minority electoral successes that occurred this year.

Now, it is one thing to have the opportunity and it is quite another thing to have a person who is able to seize that opportunity and to realize a dream that is shared by many people. The election for sheriff was hotly-contested. Without making any statement as to the merits of the various candidates who offered themselves for the position, suffice it to say it took three separate elections to finally determine the sheriff of this great county. That individual is Mr. Glenn Maynor who is about to be invested with the great power of that position.

In other counties around the state, they have a sheriff, but in Robeson County we do things differently simply because we are different from any other county. Since we are so different I do not think you would be surprised if we did things differently when it comes to politics. In Robeson no racial group has a majority of the population or the elected voters so the political rules that apply in other places do not apply in Robeson

County. We have our own special ways of doing things. We have our own special offices, and instead of simply electing a sheriff, we elect a High Sheriff.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Sheriff of Robeson County and the sheriff of any other county in North Carolina, by virtue of being the sheriff, is the chief law enforcement officer of the county. In Robeson County, in addition to being the chief law enforcement officer, the sheriff is also the High Sheriff. When I use the term High Sheriff what I mean is that any person in Robeson County--no matter who they are and no matter what kind of problem they have--feels that they can go to the High Sheriff and get their problem solved. If they have petitioned the Board of Education, the Board of Social Services, the Health Board or the County Commissioners and not gotten satisfaction, regardless of the district in which they live, they know that they elected the High Sheriff. They know that the High Sheriff is the most powerful public officer in the county.

By virtue of the authority of that position--which goes back to the Sheriff of Nottingham in England and even further back--they can enlist his support and he will get on the phone and do whatever is necessary in order to see that justice is rendered on their concern.

I am happy to say to the citizens of Robeson County that we have elected the consummate law enforcement officer in the person of Mr. Maynor. I can now say that since Mr. Maynor is no longer a candidate so I am certainly not endorsing him for any public office. In any case he obviously did not need any such endorsement since he was successful in three elections. He is now the Sheriff-Elect of Robeson County. As such I would be remiss in my responsibility as the Resident Superior Court Judge if I did not speak well of our new Sheriff, Mr. Glenn Maynor. The voters, in their inherent wisdom, have elected the consummate jack-of-all-trades. You have elected a man as High Sheriff who is second to none in the State of North Carolina and in the great Democratic State of Robeson in getting things done for his constituents.