

March leads to Day of Healing plans

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Barnett criticized those who reacted to Cooper's death, but did not respond to black-on-black homicides. Some black leaders were openly hostile to the Jan. 27 Black Monday rally and boycott, while others ignored it.

Barnett's remarks came after his own 1,000 Man March Against Drugs and Violence on

Saturday drew more than 300 marchers. Demonstrators marched from First Mayfield Baptist Church off Oaklawn Avenue to West Charlotte High School for a rally.



Barnett

"Black Monday caused divisions," Barnett said. "We have got that behind us. We want to deal with the fallout as a result of that.

"It is OK to focus on black-white relations but we have got to do some serious work on ourselves...mainly among us adults," Barnett said. "Nobody is campaigning for that cause. That's one of the things we are

really going to start focusing on."

Barnett said he is mailing invitations to the Day of Healing meetings to leaders of black organizations, among others.

Also as a result of Saturday's march, Barnett said black men will cook for black women at a March 1 cookout. The location for the cookout will be announced later, he said.

Slave recollections turned into book

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

HAMPTON, Va. - Five floors up in Hampton University's elegant main library, slim boxes of files hold the stories of American slavery.

The crumbling sheets of lined paper are not official accounts, but the words of men and women telling what it was like to be born as property.

They talk of work and hunger, some situations so cruel that editors collecting the conversations doubted them. Some tell of favored treatment and white relatives. Some describe slavery after the war - before news of freedom reached their ears.

By the time they were interviewed it was the 1930s, 70 years after the Emancipation Proclamation. Hampton Agricultural and Normal School had just become Hampton Institute, a transformation that made it eager to take on serious research.

Nationwide, the Depression was on and the government was putting people to work, some through the Federal Writers' Project.

Why not send out a team of black interviewers, proposed Thomas Calhoun Walker, the accomplished former slave from Gloucester, Virginia had no black writers on its work-project rolls. Who better to approach former slaves, who were unlikely to be frank with white listeners?

Several black colleges were approached, but only

Hampton Institute came through with money. College President Arthur Howe lamented that Negro history was neglected at all levels of schooling, even college, said Jeanne Zeidler, director of the Hampton University Museum.

In a letter, he talked of the interviews' importance in supplying that information.

"He says that if we are ever going to prove that democracy works and that a minority group can exist congenially and prosper ... we must educate white people about the experience of the Negro," Zeidler said.

The team of 13 black workers got cramped quarters: three desks and a single typewriter, said historian Charles L. Perdue Jr. at the University of Virginia.

By then, former slaves were difficult to find. But the interviewers set out in 1936 with a long list of questions. Who named slave babies? Did slaves attend funerals of whites? Can you read and write?

Soon, they let their subjects talk as they pleased, seeing that their own stories were more compelling. In this way more than 300 Virginians who were former slaves dictated their life histories.

"Did I see any genals? Sho, I seen Grant and Butler all de time. Yessuh, I seen Lincoln an' shook hands wid him. My mother, Ellen Wynder, uster cook things an' sell em in de camps ... Dat's how come I seen so many dose big men,"

said Matilda Carter Hampton in an interview conducted by Anderson on Jan. 4, 1937.

Sixty years later, the effort to interview former slaves has itself become a piece of Virginia history.

A book called "The Negro in Virginia" was the result of the project, but it quoted little of the material. Roscoe Lewis, a Hampton Institute chemistry professor, headed the team of black writers.

An easygoing, personable man, he was as comfortable with the illiterate and poor as he was with students, friends and colleagues.

Lewis kept interviewing former slaves long after the book was published in 1940. He died in 1961 at 57, never having fulfilled his dream of publishing his transcripts in their entirety.

His files at the Hampton University archives hold some of the original documents of the Virginia Writers' Project interviews, such as this one.

"When ah was a slave, ah minded cows. Ah had seven brothers an' sistuhs. Ah doan know how old ah am. Back dah nobuddy know how old dey is. Twarn't no book. Hain't ah tell you white folks sell colored folks lak cattle, sheep, pigs," said former slave Ellis Bennett in a Jan. 7, 1937 interview.

In the 1960s, Perdue found roughly half of the documents, then scattered, and published them, changing as little as possible.

Summit on race relations

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"While I continue to believe Don Reid's comments were inappropriate for the forum where they were made and that he ran the risk of inflaming the community, I agree that, statistically, his comments were correct," Simms said. "But before we get any further down this road of division, distrust and suspicion, leaders of this community need to stop, take a hard look at where we are headed and confront the racial issues that threaten our future."

Simms said he supports a county proposal for a task force on race relations.

Mecklenburg County commissioners chair Parks Helms noted the poor state of race relations in his state of the county address last month. He also wants to convene a task force which will report back to commissioners this fall.

Race was one of three issues discussed at a recent seminar by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Urban League, of which Simms is chairman of the board.

President Clinton even mentioned race relations in his inaugural address and again in his State of the Union address Wednesday.

Simms proposed an event lasting two or three days, if necessary, and involving local leaders and national experts heading workshops to help improve schools, government and the criminal justice system.

The summit would be an opportunity for citizens to air their frustrations and learn more about each other.

"I hope we can enter the year 2000 with a clear agenda of where we're going, and leave the baggage of the old years

behind," Simms said.

Bob Davis, who also criticized Reid, said it looks like Reid and others have recognized the race problem

"and something needs to be done about it, but nobody knows what."

"I think race relations are terrible, because nobody wants to admit we have got a problem," said Davis, chairman of the Black Political Caucus.

He noted that an interdenominational, interracial group headed by the Rev. James Samuel of Little Rock AME Zion Church has discussed a revival of the city's Community Relations Commission.

That commission is credited with keeping the city together during the turbulent days of the

civil rights movement. The semi-independent agency was restructured about four years ago and now is considered a government agency.

"Now it is a tiger without teeth," Davis said.

Simms said major topics of the race summit would include education, employment, housing, health care and public safety.

Concurrent workshops would be held over the two- or three-day period so those attending could sit in on several different meetings.

"It would be my intention that the output of this conference would form an agenda for this community as we enter the next century," Simms said.

"We need to initiate broad, public dialogue in order to improve race relations in this community. One of the biggest barriers to resolving race issues is avoidance of these painful, stressful issues. But we cannot confront problems if we won't acknowledge their existence and begin constructive dialogue."

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