

William N. Morris Jr.
By Elizabeth Gritter
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Memphis

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Sugarmon made first bid for public office in 1959.

I didn't have any special memories. I do remember it. It was a unique situation to have an Af Am involved in local political situation where there was an obvious bias in the community toward whites and numbers suggested whites wouldn't vote for blacks and that type of situation. I thought it was very courageous thing for him. He's a very intelligent, qualified, competent person. His only negative as far as political office was concerned is he was black. We became friends even in those years and have remained friends throughout the years. It was an interesting situation. He conducted himself in such a scholarly and mannerly way. You had to be attracted to him as an individual. I thought that that was important. It was not a hostile candidacy at all as I recall. It was one where we he articulated his qualifications in a very good manner. Then as much later, it was difficult for a black candidate to get sufficient funding because African Americans didn't contribute to campaigns and whites would not. You had to run a campaign based on – a very frugal campaign – based on getting grassroots people out working and getting into the churches, as you do in the South and particularly in the African American communities, a great deal of the political effort is handled more in the churches through the ministers and church congregations than most places.

Do you remember what people were saying about his candidacy. You said were a supporter but you were one few whites--.

No, I didn't say that I was supportive, b/c I don't recall I was even involved in the campaign. At that point, I was just out of the Memphis and new in Memphis myself, had only been living there 3 years. My connection and how I knew about it was that I joined the JCC and one of our members, Bill Farris, was a candidate at the time for public works. That's where I got involved in politics as a group but not as individual. I didn't have a role to play at that point. Not until about 5 years later that I really became involved politically and ran for sheriff.

I saw you integrated police cars.

By the time, civil rights act passed in 63 and activated in summer 64. I was elected in August 64 and became the first sheriff of a large metropolitan area to be looking at issue of making changes in compliance with civil rights act. It was quite interesting for me coming from rural N Miss. Town where I grew up in a very poor environment. I had a different attitude about blacks at that point b/c I had always been friendly toward blacks. They'd been my friend. When I became sheriff, I was 31 and I had never been in law enforcement but I was very active individual in the community. I understood community's multicultural situation. And knowing I was elected by total community,

when I ran my campaign I got a good feel for the accountability situation of being equal toward all people. I ran into office the first day and had colored water fountain. That was abominable to me, changed that first day. I looked employment situation and women doing equal jobs to men were being paid 60 percent of same amount of money and so I began to make transition there. The biggest issue was the fact that we had black deputies who could only arrest black people. That had been the policy until Sept. 1 when I went into office. They generally were seen only in black communities. I made a decision that day to deal with that issue and we accomplished that. Turned out not to be difficult at all b/c I handpicked most racist white deputies I could come up with, brought them in my office, and we talked with them about how to do something historical and how to give real leadership and become a great humanitarian in that process and that is to adopt one of the black officers to be their partner in squad car and accept responsibility of introducing that black officer to white culture b/c those black officers would never have thought about going into white restaurants at that point and particularly going into white neighborhoods to make an arrest or serve paper. They just didn't do that. None had certainly arrested a white person. Everyone of the white officers to me made one of the greatest contributions of my administration in that they accepted the responsibility and everyone of them became an absolute leader in terms of--. Their whole lives changed b/c they became friends with these black officers. Within 30 days after we began process, the black officers were being invited over to house, meet family, have barbeque. That was part of plan. It didn't take long for our black officers to get a feel--. I reminded them that the badges they wore was that you represent me... As we looked at process, those that disagree with our policies, we were able to let them find work elsewhere. Over two years, we were able to transcend this. It was becoming professional, people hired qualification, women getting equal pay, we were treating everybody the same, we had situation where rules about no gratuities. The whole thing was I thought the sheriff's department became a lightning rod, a good beacon of light of the new course of relationship in our community -- of equal opportunity and equal treatment. When sanitation strike came up, it was obvious to me then that it was a black and white issue there, that leadership in city wanted to continue doing leadership in same old way. In sanitation department, people working under all conditions of weather without proper gear, safety equipment not available, training not available, even to the point in that dept that we started volunteer program of teaching people to read and write. They couldn't tell whether getting paid right amount or not. It was a very terrible situation I thought in terms of indignities. Anyhow, strike took place.

In your capacity of sheriff, you started volunteer work?

Yes.

You did that b/c you saw how bad.

Yes. Strike took place and it ended up creating a national situation and it appeared to me that organized labor was to be the catalyst for trying to move these changes -- AFSCME in town, leadership took charge -- was a national organization, recruited other organizations as well as SCLC -- It was a do or die situation frankly. They were willing to go to the wall to make the changes. In about 1967 I had been reelected sheriff two-year term, elected without opposition. I was very happy about that. Situation continued to get worse

and of course assass. Took place. I was involved in creating the curfew and working with the city and incorporating our effort with the state of TN, sent national guard in. Very trying time. I mentioned earlier about the economic situation, economics of our city began to change b/c there was a great exodus from businesses to move out of downtown, to move to suburbs, the safety zone for white businesses. B/c with blacks beginning to permeate the downtown area, it became for whites an unsafe zone.

People were fearful they would riot.

The whole thing – there was an anger between blacks and whites and whites didn't want to mix with blacks and blacks were forced to sit in back of buses and special places to sit, couldn't go – all those conditions existed in 50s and early 60s. The response of white community was called white flight at that point. Then school busing became a () issue. Big issue it was and continues even today. White suburban school system basically and black urban school system now. That translates into many many of problems our community today that our society hasn't been able to deal with. In other words it hasn't gone away. Even with all of the positive things happened, we're still culturally poles apart b/c the black community is viewed as a whole as being one of a cultural entitlement versus productivity in spite of all that's going on. There's an anti-felling toward black gov't by many. So, things are still in many areas still shaky in terms of cultural enhancement and ability to live and work together and have common purposes and work together to solve common problems together.

What can be done to make things less polarized?

We don't have but an hour in this interview but obvious to me we need to do a better job in terms of convincing the community of adequate investment in school system to educate kids in a way that's productive. When I say that I understand full well, there's a high percentage of kids coming to school from broken home environment b/c of lack of job availability, training, income, there's not a high level of expectation for children. Children find that they're () in public schools, they're more obedient to their gang buddies than trying to deal with home situation where there is no home basically. Single parents. That influence is so great that translates into community crime, disorder, drugs, prostitution (teenage) far beyond scope that law enforcement can deal with. promiscuity, morality has diminished dramatically since 60s. We thought things bad in sixties had to deal with equality but now it is a license now to do freedom whatever even in your face attitude. Shopping centers destroyed b/c of abuse by kids 14 to 15 16 years old, changes the dynamics. I know two major shopping systems, investments, both going out of business, built two decades ago. Now, they call them the hood.

Shopping centers gangs hang out.

Yeah. People don't go there.

That's what built for in first place, build community.

Theaters get accosted, girls are mistreated. Guys hang around, physical abuse. We didn't have all that even though we had problems 40 – almost 50 years ago when talking about late 50s and early 60s. With all the civil rights freedom we've had – Ben Hooks is good friend of mine and we grew up politically together – I suspect Ben Hooks would say

same thing I have. We've unleashed a whole lot of anger from black community and expectation now of something from nothing. We created Great Society that started sending down help which ultimately became a crutch for so many. Training for jobs to replace assistance was never put into place. Many many AF AM working today and doing well but attitude among many in public school system today that there's not much to look forward to, even though everybody wants to go to college and get good jobs. From masses, they feel hopeless. The average age of our college student at our university today is 27. So, what's happened? What happens to kids coming out of high school? Too many aren't making it. The number of kids who start high school who finish is getting lower and lower, truncating. You asked me what would you do about it. If I had an answer to that, it would be "With a lot of money" because a lot of wonderful people, social scientists, etc. have tried to figure out what to do with things taking place and I don't know how to answer that. It costs more and more money to provide the services that are demanded by constituencies who do not produce revenue to get those services. 85 to 90 percent of schools have a free breakfast when get there. Who pays for that? Daycare for thousands of kids – free. No, paid for by somebody else but available to low-income people. Housing – lack of it. We even have people who expect utilities paid for. Other people pay for it. We got people free education but somebody has to pay for it. We're not putting enough people back into the economic mainstream to produce adequate revenue to pay for services then provided. In Washington see spending millions in other parts of world. We're providing health care for all the people in SC who cannot provide for themselves, even small businesses, and then I thought of hospitals and somebody has to produce revenue to pay for that. Our tax rate continues to go up and people on fixed income, now on taxing environment negative to them. System becomes very unfair after a while. Not any quick fixes at all. Added to that, newest dimension is illegal immigration, adding millions of illegal and legal immigrants to mix of employment pool to the point of where a much larger segment of our low-income AF AM community find it more difficult to get a work situation that pays them enough to get off welfare. That's significant. If you look in our community today, where building trade used to be dominated by AF AM now it's Hispanic. We don't know what happened to AF AM. So, and the problem will continue to, I expect, grow in that regard. Now even to point that we in this country federal government is requiring local government to provide services to illegals. CA is a good example. In CA, working, middle class people will pay the bill. We're close to making it very difficult for middle class people to survive. So, are things better today than 50 years ago. I think our country in trying to do good failed to control in a way to support the changes adequately to make it a productive initiative – the civil rights thing. Just opening the door to equal rights without opportunity didn't make any sense to me.

Impact of black public officials. You mentioned an attitude against black government and looking at literature they thought once blacks attain political power they could dramatically make things better. You mentioned a lot of limits to that. What do you see as benefits or do you think having a black in public office had a positive--.

I think we have some awfully qualified competent black officials. Expectations for black officials greater, I think, than white officials more often than not. Same thing has happened in Africa – with apartheid, comes along have black leader. Mandela – now

we're going to have schools for everybody. Parallel to here, blacks expected black leadership to all of a sudden convert wealth in community to chicken in every pot for black community. While a lot of that has happened, it is not limitless in terms of activity/ability. There's not a pot that just grows with money, money has to be created, only so much money. Our city and county in greater doubt now than it's ever been. Endless demand to build schools and do things without benefit of being able to afford to do it. I think we're seriously on edge unless we put some type of control as mayor Wharton seems to be doing now on our growth of government and growth of gov't providing too many services to too many people with no return. Used to be community saying from white to brown to black to broke b/c change in economics in community was a hostile move by a lot of corporate entities out of areas where leadership is black. Hopefully that's changing. Now, more minorities in Congress, Senate, judgeships, courts, etc. Here's where in 2004 only look back and see where we were 50 years ago I think you have to look to see where we're 50 years from now. Hopefully our democracy will adjust so we catch up to issue of individual accountability and productivity. We moved from industrial into informational society, unfortunately we didn't move education society up. Now, not enough of those jobs. Mfg now is 2 to 3 percent of employment where it was 40 percent before. Numbers have dwindled b/c robots and computerization taken place of human being in those shops. I went into a computer mfg operation in Japan a few years back and looked around and said, "Where's all the people." Put computer to work and put people out of work.

So the things that opened the door 50 years ago just--.

Now those doors are closed. If things had stayed the same, then it would've been fine. Jobs changed and training people had, no jobs for them. We've tried. When I was mayor, we had lots of companies who moved out of one operation to another. So people working there no skills. Technology wiped out labor. We gave tax incentives to businesses to pay for re-training of people they had. When upgraded, they had salary increases. Still not enough of that. Where had 60 employees, now only 30 and 20 and 10.

No wneeding master's degrees.

Exactly. I'm on Board of Visitors at Univ. of Memphis. We have a school out there we started to train people in hospitality industry, which is worldwide need. Our numbers have doubled. At same time, we have FedEx institute, all about info tech. We're creating an environment that will demand highest paid jobs in entire city. So our university is meeting a lot of those needs but at the same time we're having difficulty getting money keeping our univ. going. We're having to depend more on private funds to keep univ. going and enhance our ability to train people for jobs that are relevant. When we're doing that, we're talking about 1 to 2 percent or so. What about people out here, lack of rat control, in substandard housing, babies being born. Federal gov't keep spending money, money. How deal with variables? In one small community which is microcosm of cities in America.

Influence of black vote and SCDC. Importance of that club and how played a role in campaign.

In all campaigns I was involved in last 16 years particularly, I rec'd over 90 percent of all African American votes in all elections as well as 90 percent of all the white votes. NO one does that anymore it was b/c when running for mayor I was sheriff and Af Am felt that I treated black people fairly. Maxine Smith said, "I know you must've been doing something wrong but I just haven't been able to find it." When I had Abernathy in jail during riots, we had time to talk. There was a confidence that I was real and that when time came to build Lorraine Motel, no one else was willing to move on issue of funding it. I stood up in meeting and said if city and state do their share, we'll be our first to put this s hare in and let's build this thing.

CR Museum?

Yes. We build museums for whites. Black community has right too to expect something from their investment. We began to deal with issue of taking a visible look at projects to see who was going to get benefit of public dollars. If it's not a fair deal, what are you going to do to make it fair? If do something 100 percent for white neighborhood, plan on doing something equally beneficial for black neighborhood.

Did you find that the people who supported you the most with these projects were the ones that were elected with black support. Obviously it made a positive difference with you in terms of getting benefits for black community.

That's right. Well the truth of the matter is that in terms of mayors we had mayors for all those years that were basically dominated by the black/white? community? I was probably the only mayor in a position of administrative leadership that played a role as heavy as I did then and now. Until you come along with two black mayors starting in 1990 and Wharton in 2002. Wharton worked for me for 16 yrs b/f he became mayor. Herenton was in school system. I never personally thought he did anything outstanding in elevating Memphis school system but he's a friend of mine and we've had these discussions. I'm not going to patronize him b/c he's mayor and my friend. Truth is we made a lot of mistakes in dealing with school problems in late 60s and 70s. We could've done a lot of things differently. We were more interested in racial divisiveness than academic successes.

In terms of busing and how polarized community.

We spent too much time addressing those issues without dealing with neighborhood issues – building a strong neighborhood so that schools could benefit from strength of that neighborhood. For example, we have teachers now who have no idea about home life of children. When I was mayor, I put first daycare in a high school to keep young mothers of 15 and 16 in school. We did that at Northside school. I've been so concerned about that school, even my church has adopted that school today. We had health care for pregnant women in that school so they could have healthy baby and stay in school. Give them sense of pride, health, and get enough education to get a job and take care of family. At same time, there's prostitution. How do you deal with that.

So these alternative ways of getting things done and moving beyond racial divisiveness. I think what's happened about whether or not black political leadership has made it more productive for the black community in terms of things they get, I don't know that that's

happened b/c I don't think just b/c you're black you have a more germane consideration for concerns of people who need help than whites. I'd put my record up against any black official in America about contributions toward black community. I really would. It's not just in dialogue – I'm talking about real terms. It's a matter of electing right kind of black officials who will show right type of concern, be role model, so a desire on part of all community to do better. Our city I think we're experiencing an unparalleled moral decay. It's very discouraging.

Side 2

SCDC – did you have to appear before them?

They, like many organizations, had a screening committee. You would go b/f it and they would ask questions and you made promises when you could and they would decide whether they would support you. With the exception of maybe the first--. I think I had their support for maybe 30 years, all--. asw iht all the other black organizations in town. I had labor support, good media support, but it was b/c I guess I became the first chief executive who believed in consensus building. To me, that meant more than patronizing. It meant getting people around the table and talking about what our needs are. I did that in every community in Memphis. I went to more churches than the local parish priest. I was in churches, schools, people's homes. I had pgms that dealt with getting kids off the st. When I was sheriff, we reduced juvenile crime rate to lowest rate ever recorded. I'd take parents to court for contributing to negligence of their children. We used to have civic clubs in neighborhoods. They were very political. If their neighborhood wasn't treated right by sanitation, etc., they'd appear before bodies and say, "Why not?" Those same clubs – Frayser was all white back then for most part – if you talked about doing housing project in that area, civic clubs would come out against civic council and raise ruckus. Public housing became a very bitter word in the community. It's always their neighborhood or ours.

What time period?

Probably late 50s, 60s, and early 70s. Probably 20 year period where that was major, major tying and an issue that mayors had to deal with. We didn't have much of that outside the city but then I brought county gov't into city b/c SC gov't represents all the consitutions of county and city. The mayor represents more than 7 states in U.S.

Impact on city of King's death and your role in that time. You said major economic impact.

Yeah, I think that it did. There was a fear factor in terms of new businesses looking at Memphis as a place to locate. It was a city with a lot of labor, union problems. Industry that wanted a new location would not look at Memphis b/c if needed 200 employee situation the first thing that would happen in their mindset someone would want to unionize and tell them how to run their business. Became a big negative and we saw companies leave Memphis b/c of that. Firestone chose to close their plant, same thing with Ford Motor and International Harvester that had major plants. Armour and co. I could name company after company after co. left the city. When I became mayor, I joined iwht our governor Lamar Alexander, and I said, "We got to re-invent our city." We created JOBS

conference to look at what Memphis could be. We knew we could never be an Atlnat. We don't have any surf, slopes, slot machines, what are we going to do. We had river, commerce, transportation, more railroads here than any other city in America. Sittin gin heart, epicenter of opualtion of America. We have a Strong work ethic, we began to reinvest ourselves asa districtubiton center, warehouse, and all that goes with that. That was an overt act on our part b/c as consensus building was impt to me we found strategic planning is very important to our city as it is to your university and IBM. WE began to do that in early 70s and take our message not just across America an all across the world. I visited to Japan. They had never heard of Memphis, TN. We began to attract busiensse. We brought 120 Japanese businesses over next 15 yeares into TN. We have largest growth of Japanese industrial jobs of any place in America. Didn't just happen. We went, sold them, and brought them. We recognized cultural deifferences and dealth with it, we created a comfort zone. I went to NY and spent na inordinate amount of time with INernational Ppaer to move it to Mphs. B/w Dick Hacket an dmyself we wore them out and they came. Prex of company said best move they ever made. Not only did they move a few hundred people, now they have 1000s of people here. It's to them the center of their business universe. We went out, we went selling. We promised them company employees and to train those employees, partnership with state. So we've had good job growth, we have reinvented city. Now, we wanted to make Memphis a destination city – showcase GRacelanda nd re-build Beale St. For people to come here instead of jus tocming through. Early 80s we weren't even on bus stop. We began to work with tourist industry across America. Now, they start coming to Memphis. We have a lot of good things going on in Memphis. WE are a transitional city, we are a city burdened with the same thing many urban cities have – we still have mixture of problems of black and whit e nonproductive citizens, greater dependency on government than we ought to have, we have too many people who are not individually productive and never will be, too many people committeing crimes and going to jail – prison pop going up, inadequate medical delivery system that affordable?, educational system that has eroded as opposed to being enhanced and not able to meet sociological concerns in classroom enviornment in our neighborhodods, we still have such a transitional city that we need to be looking toward more internationalism. Try to do with Memphis in May. I still believe on positive side that Memphis TN will ultimately be a model city down the road where the Af Am and black culture will raise itself up by its own boostrops if you will and grow and mature to a point of where it in the year 2050 we will not just be a black managed city, we will be Hispanic and have 100 languages spoken hear perhaps. Memphis is b/c of airport an dFed Express and ? and so forth, it will be interest to see Memphis in 2050. I hope my grandchildren like it.

Anything else to add.

No. I congratulate you and university for looking at other place sin the world and help us at least take a look at the past b/c if we don't know our past how can we help create a good future. I congratulate you. Good luck to you.