

John T. Fisher
 By Elizabeth Gritter
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 Memphis TN

John T. Fisher Interview

JT: I went to public school in Memphis. I went to a grammar school at Memphis State. I left there and went to a school in Virginia. Went to Univ. of Virginia and went in Marine Corps. In my day everything went into military. I graduated from college in 1956. Left and came back to a family business, worked for a family employer for over 40 years. "I grew up in a traditional Southern city. There were no black children in my grammar school in the forties. I'd been to few social occasions with a black person on an equal kind of basis. It just didn't happen. It wasn't what the world was about. So, I began to change some in the sixties. So, all kinds of social awareness came up about racially divide and still plenty around today but it's a lot better now that it was. My first real experience with that came about 1962, 1963, b/c I built a new building for a car dealership and about a year b/f I built it I was called on by NAACP by Maxine Smith and she talked to me about restrooms. There were in fact colored restroom. That was just the way the world was. For me to build it differently than that was different. What I was doing was ordinary and to be expected and well accepted. Maxine was there with about 3 or 4 other people. She looked me square in the eye and talked me very straight forward and articulate and well educated direct somebody would do. I appreciated that and acknowledged then and now. Her only request was don't build separate facilities. I said let me think about it. I knew it would be different. I anticipated it would not be accepted and almost all? Persons of white staff complained. I called her back and didn't tell staff I thought about it 2 days and decided what to do. If that is the way world is going I don't want to be left out. I told her we would honor her request. Only difficulty is that we had a ... Never had an incident. That was my first encounter with civil rights. I got involved with SS b/c of the church - Episocopian. We want to visit with mayor. WE know you know him b/c grew up next to him.

[Talks about SS and Memphis cares]

He had never really encountered it --. Lawson didn't have black mentality.

What do you mean by black mentality?

In talking to black males who grew up in Memphis there is a deference to me as a white person, esp. to someone who was a white car owner, he didn't talk to me like that, as if he was talking to a colleague. That was very different experience. During Sanitation strike.

[Talks about SS and Memphis cares]

352: Businessmen? Some say supportive of CR others didn't

Most of them wanted it to go away. I was in Henry Loeb's Sat. office after King had been killed on Thursady night. When we were there he was a white conservative country club group. Lots of them telephoned him and told him he'd done a bad job. I'd never seen someone as dejected as Henry Loeb that day. He left Memphis.

Did you think businessman was moral reasons or bad for business?

Yeah. I even heard people say I'm not sorry it happened, I'm just sorry it happened here.

What say Maxine Smith say to you?

Thi sis not the way the world is going. We got to break down barriers. We've got tos tart with tehse designated separators. Offensive to me to go these places, have to look for colored restoom. Way she described it, exactly what I would've done. I guess she knew we were going to do that b/c we had put a sign up that said we were fixing to do that.

[Talks about school board, didn't want to accept black student, who later committed suicide; school desegregation/busing era.]

Side B

[Talks about his time in Geneva, South Africa.]

Why do think in existence segregated society and resistance to a change when it's a social construction?

58: Slavery. Historical legacy passed down. Old adage in the South was a nigger's like a duck, has no soul. That's what people believed in slavery those days, slave was in bondage, not viewed as part of human brotherhood. That's where I think it came from.

82: Before your moment of consciousness in 1962, were you aware of the civil rights activity taking place in Memphis or did they any sort of impact on you.

I wasn't aware of any taking place. "Everybody here was talking about how peaceful Memphis was and how content the black people in Memphis were, and that we wouldn't have any trouble here like they were having elsewhere."

EG: I'm focusing my master's on 1959 city election and looking at press coverage and rhetoric – all the whit epoliticans are saying, "Well, race relations are peace and they're fine here--.

JF: That's exactly right.

EG: Harmonious.

JF: "Memphis took a lot of pride in that. So people like me – I'm just--. 1959 is when I married. I came out of the Marine Corps in 1958. I met my wife in 1958 and married in '59. I went to work in '58, so that's the very beginning of my work career and all so. So, my view of that is strictly a bystander really in 1959. In keeping my ear to the ground and in being in the car business and working, I took some comfort in the fact that Memphis was not having the racial push and shove that was going on in other cities,

beginning to go on in other cities. The reassurance that I got was that the black people in Memphis were content. That was story I was told, and I had no reason to challenge it."

EG: You didn't have contact with the black people?

JF: I remember They'd been taking care of my house all my life, black servants. When I had Ben and Frances Hooks over for dinner, first time every at my dinner table. That was an emotional event for me because it was so different.

EG: When was that?

JF: 1968.

EG: It's hard for me to understand coming from the North. I wonder how white people could think that whites were peaceful and harmonious.

JF: "The general mood that was put out by the establishment whoever that is, whoever sort of puts this word out, is that we're not going to have the trouble here, because the black people in Memphis are content."

EG: Yeah, all that was in the newspaper coverage. Were you aware of the freedom movement downtown where they boycotted Main Street.

JF: Yes, I was aware of it.