

On trial in the Deep South: Atlanta's first black cops

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By Sam Heys

They were policemen, but just barely. They had to dress in the basement of a YMCA. They couldn't wear their uniforms home. They couldn't drive a patrol car or ride a motorcycle. And they certainly couldn't arrest white folks. Atlanta's first eight black policemen were chided by other blacks and overtly despised by other policemen. "It was hell for a long time," says Johnnie P. Jones, one of the eight men who integrated the Atlanta police force in 1948.

The names of the others were Dixon, Elkins, Hooks, Lyons, McKibbens, Sanders and Strickland, but mostly they were called "the nigger police."

Selected from 109 applicants, they ranged in age from 21 to 32 and most were native Atlantans. Six had been to college and seven were World War II veterans. One had been a butcher, another a janitor, another a typesetter. A couple had sold insurance.

They were sworn in March 8, 1948, and went on duty April 3.

"Mayor William B. Hartsfield gave us a little pep talk before we went out our first day," Henry Hooks says. "He said, 'Ninety-five percent of the white officers don't want you, so you're going to be on trial, and you're going to have to show them you can police just as well as they can.'"

A precinct was established for the black officers at the Butler Street YMCA, and when the first two emerged from the basement to walk their beat that first afternoon, "there must have been 400 to 500 people out there following them," says Herbert Jenkins, Atlanta police chief from 1947 to 1972.

They were heroes, long awaited by blacks tired of being called "Mary" or "Boy" and fearing the men who were supposed to protect them. "It was just like a parade. Everywhere we went, they went," says Robert McKibbens.

McKibbens and three others went on to become career officers. Two of the initial eight quit within the first year. It was not an easy job.

The black policemen were continually harassed by white officers. Newsweek had reported in 1947 that 25 percent of Atlanta's policemen were members of the Ku Klux Klan. "I expect that was about right," says Jenkins, "although it might have been higher than that."

"I think the general attitude of the department was that it (integration) wouldn't work," says Everett Little, a white officer who retired in 1976 after 38 years on the force. "But it did work. The chief made it work. He told us it was something that had to be."

Now police chief in Smyrna, Little acknowledges there was friction, however.

"There was a white policeman who had a \$200 reward out to the first black who would kill one of us," says James E. (Billy) McKinney, who joined the force in June 1948 and is now a state legislator, representing Fulton County in the House of Representatives.

"We'd be trying to cross Decatur Street," says Hooks, "and they white officers would try to run over us."

Black cops lacked authority

If they arrested a black person and needed a paddy wagon, the black officers had to call white patrolmen.

"They (whites) drove the wagons and were not cooperative," says McKinney. "They might pull up on the other side of the street, and if you had an unruly prisoner, they might just sit there and not help you get him in the wagon. They'd do almost anything to irritate you and show disdain for you. They'd say, 'What did this nigger do?'"

There was also contact with white officers in court. "You'd see them giggling when you were trying to try a case in court. You knew they were making fun of us," Hooks says.

Because they could wear uniforms only while on duty, black officers wore plainclothes in the courtroom, where they often had to watch members of their race be humiliated. "Black people were nothing in the courts," says McKinney. "It was a total degradation of integrity."

Policemen were prohibited from drinking, even in their homes, and Hartsfield had warned the black officers to be wary of being set up. "We had all kinds of difficulty with them (white policemen) trying to frame them by trying to get them drunk or by claiming they were drunk when they weren't," says Warren Cochrane, who was executive director of the Butler Street YMCA and chairman of a committee of black leaders who worked with the city on issues concerning black policemen.

First detectives harassed

Howard Baugh, who joined the force in 1953, and Ernest Lyons were both harassed after becoming the first black detectives in 1955. Lyons was dismissed from the force after being arrested by white officers for supposedly being drunk, even though the charge of public drunkenness was dismissed in court. He was rehired a year later.

Baugh says, "I came home the first night I made detective and found a white lady on my front porch, very dirty, in the cold of winter, lying on my glider. As I stuck my key in the front door, two white police officers rolled up, pistols drawn, and ordered me off the front porch and asked me why I had this white woman on my porch. My former sergeant, Beavo Brooks, had told me that night, 'I don't know where it's coming from, but there's a hit on you. Be careful.' Three or four minutes later, Beavo came speeding around the corner. That's the only thing that saved my life. I think I would have been carried to the Chattahoochee and killed."

The black officers also received antagonism from some blacks, who derisively called them "YMCA cops." "We had some real problems develop," says Jenkins, "when black citizens would threaten and intimidate black police."

"A lot of times you'd be arresting a black, especially a black female," says Lyons, "and they'd holler, 'That's all right. Y'all don't do nothing but lock up blacks. You can't lock up white people. I wouldn't have that damn job.'"

"We had quite a bit of resistance to arrest because of that attitude," McKinney says.

‘Some blacks accepted us’

Jones remembers, "There were a lot of black people who accepted us with open arms. Some of the criminal element resented us, though, because we were able to get into them and make arrests that other people had not been able to."

Atlanta's black neighborhoods were havens for lawlessness during the 1930s and 1940s. Acts committed by blacks against blacks received little priority from white policemen, and when arrests were made, all-white juries seldom meted out justice. Blacks often refused to testify against blacks in court because of a distrust of the law.

Policemen would arrest blacks on the cover-all charge of "loitering" or for violating the unofficial midnight curfew for blacks. Considering the police their enemy, blacks often ran when they saw an officer, prompting a chase and, often, police brutality.

As early as 1934, a group of a dozen black leaders -- including the Rev. Martin Luther King Sr., lawyer A.T. Walden, educator C.L. Harper, newspaper publisher C.A. Scott and the Rev. William Borders -- asked Atlanta Mayor James L. Key, a liberal, to integrate the police force.

"He told them, 'Your request is very reasonable, but it can't be done that quickly. Both black and white have to be educated,'" says Jenkins, a policeman who was Key's chauffeur then and sat in on the meeting.

"But Mayor Key told me after they left, 'I'm getting to be an old man, and I'll never live to see Negro police in Atlanta, but someday you're going to have to work with them, and you ought to start getting all the information you can so you can provide some leadership.' "

Jenkins hired black cops

Within a year after becoming police chief in 1947, Jenkins was employing black policemen. After studying integrated police departments in New York and Chicago, Jenkins was committed to the integration of the Atlanta force, and he found an ally in Hartsfield. "Mayor Hartsfield had been going right along with the segregationists in earlier years," says Jenkins, "but when he saw things changing, he tried to work with blacks."

Just as politics had previously prevented the hiring of black policemen, it was finally mandating their employment. The law prohibiting blacks from voting in Democratic primaries was outlawed by the Supreme Court in 1944, forcing Hartsfield to listen to black voters.

"It was negotiated over a period of about three years," says Cochrane, 80, who was executive secretary of the Negro Voters League. "Hartsfield had told us that when we got 10,000 voters registered, he would talk with us. . . . He kept his word. He was a strict segregationist, but he was good politician."

Handbills denouncing Hartsfield's intentions to integrate the force dotted trees and poles in south Atlanta, but there was also support. *Atlanta Constitution* editor Ralph McGill and *Atlanta Daily World* Publisher C.A. Scott had long advocated the integration of the police force. A Fulton County grand jury and the Atlanta Bar Association also endorsed the move. So did the

conservative Chamber of Commerce after making inquiries of the 38 Southern cities already using black police.

Limits were necessary

Atlanta was in the midst of a postwar crime wave that was attracting national attention, and Jenkins, as the new chief, was determined to improve relations between the police and the black community. Still, he placed the employment of blacks on a trial basis and gave it strict limitations: Black cops could arrest only blacks, wear their uniforms only on duty, patrol only black neighborhoods and would have their own precinct.

"Conditions required me to make some considerations. We moved into it slowly; we had to. The people had to be educated. If we had had a hothead who had wanted to go out and arrest white people, then we would have really had some riots," says Jenkins, 78.

The overriding fear, according to Jenkins, was: suppose a black officer arrests a white female. "If there hadn't been a bedroom, there wouldn't have been a racial problem," he says.

The black precinct was put under the charge of a white sergeant, Brooks, who had grown up in a racially mixed neighborhood and worked the black areas. "He wasn't conscious of color," says Jenkins.

"If it hadn't been for him, we would have never made it," says Cochrane. "He was solidly behind us and took no foolishness out of the blacks or the whites."

"They used to call Beavo a 'nigger lover' because he stood up for us like he did," says Lyons.

Brooks, however, made his officers realize the limits they had to operate under. "He cussed me out for walking through the police station once," says McKibbens. "I came in through the back where the prisoners came in, but I went on through the building and out the front door. We weren't supposed to use the front door."

The late Willie Elkins tried to arrest a white drunk on Decatur Street during his first weeks on the force, but the paddy wagon wouldn't pick him up. He resigned soon afterward, on June 16, 1948. "He said if he couldn't arrest anyone who was violating the law, then he just couldn't see it," said Jones. "It bothered me too, but I figured if we did a good job, everything would change."

Frustration part of the job

Change came slowly, though, and only after protest and political pressure, says McKinney, who replaced Elkins and spent 21 years on the force. "Pretty soon there was frustration on the part of black police, that they couldn't lock up white people, that they couldn't get promoted, that everything was done on a token basis," says McKinney. "Maybe it was best it took place in steps but, for the people involved, you felt discriminated against."

The black officers' precinct was moved to police headquarters on Decatur Street in 1953, but their lockers and office were in the basement. They were later given two patrol cars. "We kept them (black officers) on foot beats until we felt like we could trust them with a car," says Jenkins.

In 1962, with more than 40 blacks on the force, Jenkins lifted the restrictions he had placed on blacks in 1948, meaning they could arrest whites. In 1966 he eliminated the "black watch," which had given blacks a different reporting time than white officers and segregated the races. Black officers would not patrol all-white neighborhoods for several more years, however, and they'd have to go to Jenkins to get white officers to stop using the word "nigger" on the police radio.

"They'd come on and say, 'All cars be on lookout for a black nigger going west on East Avenue,'" says McKinney.

Atlanta now has 604 black officers -- 47 percent of the force -- but Baugh believes the young ones don't know anything about what the first ones endured.

"We never heard of stress back then," he says, "and if there is anybody who ever went through stress, we did. We went through harassment, we went through hate, we went through shame, we went through disgust."

"I felt we were the pioneers who were going to make it better for everyone in the city of Atlanta," says Jones, who now lives in Savannah. "I've met people recently when I visit Atlanta who remember me when I was on the police force. The respect they have even now means something to me. It makes me feel all the problems we encountered were worth it."