

Racism in America: Past and present in Forsyth County

In January 1987, Forsyth County, Georgia – 30 miles from downtown Atlanta – became the scene of the largest civil rights demonstration in America since the 1960s, drawing civil rights icons John Lewis, Andrew Young, Coretta Scott King, and Joseph Lowery as well as international media attention. Simultaneously, the turnout of 5,000 counter-demonstrators became the largest public resistance to civil rights since the sixties.

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By Sam Heys

CUMMING, Ga. - A Confederate flag draped Howard Martin's front door long before 20,000 people marched down his street.

"It ain't against the niggers," Martin said of his flag. "I've just always liked it."

Martin, 30, also likes Forsyth County, just the way it is. White.

"We want to keep it white for our children. We just want the county to stay the way it is," he said. "I don't want my little boy to have to go to school with blacks."

The father of a 12-year-old son, Martin rises each morning at 3:30 to report to his job as a machine maintenance man at Tyson Foods, a chicken-processing plant that is the county's largest employer with about 700 workers, seven of them black.

"Nobody stops them from working," said Martin. "But black and white people living together? You're going to have trouble."

When thousands of civil rights marchers walked up Old Buford Road toward the courthouse square Jan. 24, Martin watched from the front yard of his small, weathered-green house across from Cumming's City Hall. He didn't like what he saw.

"Preachers and good people marching with queers? What kind of march is that?" he said. "We can't go down to Atlanta and demand nothing from them."

"Them" is spoken often in Forsyth County. As in "them" and "us." As in Martin's door-draping Confederate flag, which is not so much about race as it is about a way of life. It just so happens that way of life has excluded blacks for 75 years.

But life is changing in Forsyth County, a hilly, rural county in the early throes of suburbanization as Atlanta spreads northward. The population (35,600) has doubled since 1970. New people have moved in, and many of them wouldn't mind if a black person moved in next to them. Suddenly, complexity reigns where constancy had for so long.

"I can't say what Forsyth County is," said Norman Baggs, editor and publisher of the Forsyth County News. "It's a whole lot of North Fulton County and a whole lot of Dawsonville (in Dawson County, just north of Forsyth County). It's almost like we're going through puberty."

The growing pains have been there for all the world to see.

It was a newcomer -- 41-year-old Charles A. "Chuck" Blackburn -- who initiated plans for the "brotherhood walk" Jan. 17 that erupted onto the nation's front pages when the walkers, estimated to be less than 100 strong, were pelted with rocks and bottles by a crowd of approximately 400 counterdemonstrators and onlookers. The following Saturday, Jan. 24, an estimated 20,000 people poured into the county seat of Cumming for a second March for Brotherhood.

Lifelong Forsyth County resident R.D. Parker was there Jan. 17 to watch the defense of Forsyth County. A 41-year-old, heavysset, gray-bearded man who works in a Norcross factory, Parker said he took his 8-year-old son with him because "that was history."

Parker said he had always taught his son to be leery of black men, "to watch them." "But now I'm teaching him to fear the black man," said Parker. "I'm not telling him to hate 'em, because you're not supposed to hate anybody."

`Why do they . . . bother us?'

Seventeen-year-old Donnie Martin (no relation to Howard Martin) does not hide his feelings about blacks. "I don't like the sons of bitches," said Martin on a raw February afternoon while shooting pool at the Barn Game Room on Atlanta Street in Cumming.

On Jan. 24, Martin had heckled black marchers as they gathered in the Lanier Plaza parking lot for their walk to the courthouse. He said it was fun. What did he do?

"Called them niggers and spit on them."

What did they do?

"Hung us birds."

Wearing a red Izod sweater, a blue, button-down collar shirt and faded jeans, Martin had laid out of work the day he was shooting pool. Having quit school in the seventh grade at 14, he is employed by a landscaping company. "We don't go down there (Atlanta) and bother them blacks," he said. "Why do they come up here and bother us?"

Martin grew up in south Forsyth County and had never been around blacks until he was sent to the Augusta State Youth Development Center. ("I stole a bunch of cars and broke into some houses," he explained.) He didn't like the blacks he met in Augusta: "They stayed in trouble, fought all the time. They thought they ruled it."

County 'invaded'

Billy Burt, a Chamblee-based trucker and lifelong Forsyth County resident, stayed out of Cumming on Jan. 24. He had seen enough the evening before. "I went down to get a pizza on that Friday night the National Guard was rolling in. I felt invaded. It made my skin crawl. That will stick with me as long as I live. I don't know if it would have felt any different if it was the Red Army from Berlin," said Burt, 39.

"Invaded" is the word most often heard when Forsyth County residents speak of the march. "I think everybody here feels raped and abused," said Gerald Blackburn, 46, city manager of Cumming. (He is not related to Chuck Blackburn.)

"The attitude of demands made by march leader Hosea (Williams) is creating a serious problem. Demands is what you receive in the Army. Everybody feels it's a threat -- 'This is a demand, and if you don't do this, this another march will be your punishment.' "

Forsyth County has historically disdained reproach from outsiders. "We're not violent people, but we won't be pushed," said Parker. "You can run a dog home, but that's as far as he'll go. Then he'll turn around and bite you. We're full-blooded Americans, and we'll fight and die for our homes if we have to."

Parker's home is east of the courthouse square on a hill simply called "The Ridge," where a cluster of proud people live in small, frame rental houses that badly need a coat of paint. "We're all Americans, and we've got to live together," said Parker. "But you can't rub something in a man's face."

Mountain proud

"From here to the Tennessee line, there are about seven counties right down the middle of North Georgia that are as stubborn and independent as any group of people you will ever find," said Baggs, who grew up in Cumming and then returned home as newspaper editor. "There's still a lot of mountain-proud folks here."

Forsyth County had a 1986 unemployment rate of only 3.7 percent, the fourth lowest in Georgia, and many self-employed residents operate on a timetable unmolested by the hustle of the outside world. If a subcontractor on a construction project says he will be there Tuesday, he might be there Tuesday, or a week from Tuesday, or whenever he gets ready.

Ben Hill Rickett is a 73-year-old retired carpenter who sells honey in front of the house he built 37 years ago on McGinnis Ferry Road. Although he lives on the Fulton County side of the road, he grew up in Forsyth County, shops there and has three sons who live there. He understands the people.

"They're for themselves. They're a county to themselves. When they say something, they stick together, and you better not mess with it," he said. "I don't mind anybody's business, and it's best you don't mind mine."

Minding one's business has long been a law of the land. "If I was hunting when I was a boy and ran up on a still, you just wouldn't mention it," said physician Marcus Mashburn, 68, former mayor of Cumming. "I would've never reported anything my neighbor did. That was his business."

Such an attitude allowed Forsyth County to enjoy a statewide reputation for lawlessness -- auto theft, burglary rings, drugs, arson --as recently as a decade ago. The courthouse was burned by the local criminal element in 1973 to destroy criminal records.

"The criminal element just intimidated the citizenry so much that it would be impossible to get a court conviction," said Bert Frye, a Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI) agent assigned to Forsyth County from 1963 to 1975 and now a special agent in charge of the Metro Drug and Vice Squad in Atlanta. "Certain individuals would come in and sit on the front row of the

courtroom for the sole purpose of staring at witnesses or jurors. And it was not uncommon at all for jurors and witnesses to get calls that their houses would be burned."

The criminal element still lives in Forsyth County, but it has been watered down by the newcomers and is kept more under control by the administration of Sheriff Wesley Walraven. Independence still rules, however:

After the County Commission drew up a new, tighter, more metropolitan-like zoning code in 1983, opposition quickly mounted. When a public hearing was held at the Forsyth County High School gymnasium, more than 1,500 people were there, often shouting their disapproval. One of them came out of the stands after county attorney Woody Jordan, who had to be taken home in a police car. A zoning revision still has not been passed.

Tempers also flared in 1984 after a disputed umpire's call during a men's softball game at Bennett Park. "We had people fighting mad who wanted to kill somebody," said Danny Foster, then county recreation director. Foster stopped the game, further angering the players. "One of them said, 'I know so-and-so, and I've got your job,' " said Foster, who had moved into Forsyth County that year. "I didn't think anything of it."

Within three months, Foster was fired, but only after the entire county recreation board was replaced. "When they say they're going to do something, they're going to do it," said Foster, 39, now a football coach at Shades Valley High School in Birmingham, Ala. (Foster was granted eight months of back pay last year by Forsyth County Superior Court Judge Frank Mills. Yet to be settled is a lawsuit by the county charging Foster with the misappropriation of county funds.)

A spirit of retaliation dates back to at least 1912, when blacks were chased out of Forsyth and Dawson counties following the rape and brutal murder of a 19-year-old Forsyth County white woman, Mae Crowe. Two black men were convicted and hanged, a third was lynched and a black preacher who had questioned Mae Crowe's virtue was horsewhipped on the courthouse square. Martial law was declared.

"People think the whole county got together," said county historian Don Shadburn. "But what you had was this small vigilante group, who, through threat and intimidation, systematically ran them out. The whites were as scared of them as the blacks were."

"My father always felt," said Mashburn, "that the county leaders at the time didn't sufficiently condemn what happened."

Inspired by an article

An absence of widespread condemnation for racist acts continues. "The biggest thing is this group has been allowed to talk without being told to back up and shut up," said Baggs, who was told in an anonymous letter last fall to "move out of the county or we'll come get you and help you move out."

Baggs had written in a column that the county had an image problem it must deal with. He wrote: "When it comes to the question of race in Forsyth County, too many good men have done nothing for too long." The column had followed the publication of an article in Creative Loafing, an Atlanta weekly newspaper, that chronicled the county's racial history.

Chuck Blackburn said the Creative Loafing article inspired him to organize the "brotherhood walk." Within five minutes of the first radio announcement Jan. 7 about the planned walk, the Blackburn Learning Center, a small private school, started receiving telephone calls. One caller threatened to burn the school with the kids in it, another called Blackburn the anti-Christ and a third said, "I've got a 30-06 bullet with your name on it."

Blackburn, who had moved from California five years earlier, abandoned his plans for the "brotherhood walk" when he saw there was no local support. It was taken over by a Gainesville, Ga., couple. Blackburn, meanwhile, moved to Florida.

"Chuck knew it was a racist county, but he thought more people would stand up," said Linda Smith, 36, associate director of the Blackburn Learning Center. "We think there are a lot of people here who are afraid to speak up."

Many Forsyth County residents who would welcome integration decline to say so publicly. "It's not the blacks we're scared of," said a 37-year-old storeowner. "It's the white people."

An official with Tyson Foods asked not to be identified when asked about the number of blacks working at the plant. "We have to exist within the community," she said. "Everybody is not sure what their neighbor thinks now."

Since the first march, the Sheriff's Department has received reports of more than 200 threatening phone calls being made in the county. The recipients range from restaurants to the authors of letters to the editor. "A few people out there get their kicks out of being tough on the telephone," said Sheriff Walraven. "If they know they can put you in fear, they can control you."

A closed society

Intimidation has long been a staple of Forsyth County segregation:

In 1968, 10 black boys and their counselors, on a camping trip from Atlanta to Lake Lanier, were told to leave the county or be carried out "feet first." They left.

In 1976, a cross was burned at Bald Ridge Marina after a black man was rented a slip for his boat.

In 1980, a black Atlanta firefighter, Miguel Marcelli, 28, was wounded as he and his black date left an Atlanta computer firm's employee picnic at Athens Park on Lake Lanier, about two miles from where Mae Crowe was raped. One of the two Forsyth County men convicted in the shooting was Melvin Crowe, who claimed to be related to Mae Crowe. When first questioned by an investigator, he said, "Somebody has got to keep the niggers out of Forsyth County. I'm glad it happened. I'm not going to tell who did it, 'cause I'll get burned out." (Arrested quickly, Crowe was given a 10-year sentence by an all-white Forsyth County jury.)

Forsyth County had 1,098 black residents in 1910 before the murder of Mae Crowe. Only 30 remained in 1920, and that number shrunk to four by 1960. The 1980 census reported one black living in the county, but most leaders feel that was an error or that the black no longer lives there.

Antebellum Forsyth County had few plantations and 898 slaves, according to the 1860 census, which listed 6,851 whites. "This county was settled by yeoman farmers," said Mashburn, whose grandfather was a leading early merchant.

Cotton was Forsyth County's principal crop, but when the boll weevil struck, destitution set in. The county's savior was rural electrification in the late 1930s, which allowed farmers to pump water to chicken houses. Farmers turned to chickens under the leadership of county patriarch Roy P. Otwell, then publisher of the Forsyth County News.

Otwell -- now 92 and in failing health -- was the president of the Bank of Cumming, mayor for 30 years and a state legislator. He not only owned the paper but also the Chevrolet and Ford dealerships and scads of property, from the buildings around the courthouse to the rentals on "The Ridge." "Whatever he wanted, happened," said a current business leader.

In such a closed society, racism flourished. While growing up, Mashburn remembers, he would hear men brag: "Be careful of me. I helped run the niggers out." "If you ever saw a black person," said Rickett, "he was with a white person." Black truck drivers making deliveries to the local chicken plant had to be escorted by a GBI agent as late as the 1970s.

Haven of 'white flight'

Residents of the community of Oscarville in northeast Forsyth County -- where Mae Crowe lived -- can still show visitors the stone supposedly used to kill her. The story of the rape and murder has been passed from generation to generation. Children have grown up rarely, if ever, seeing a black person. "The only thing they know about race is what they've heard," said Walraven. "How do they know any better when they haven't seen anything?"

With the civil rights movement of the 1960s, Forsyth County's all-white reputation made it a haven of "white flight," which has continued in the 1970s and 1980s.

"We have some people who have moved in here," said Mashburn, "who will tell you they moved in because it was all white. And they have not helped the matter any. They were not the ones throwing the bottles, but they call the high school when a black speaker comes in."

Estilene Stanford, 60, city clerk of Cumming, said, "We have a few people who moved here when they started having trouble with the schools in Atlanta."

Burt, the Chamblee-based trucker, believes the "troublemakers" are primarily newcomers. "We live here because we was born here. The biggest majority of the people who moved here from Atlanta did it because there are no blacks," he said. "If everything was okay in Atlanta, they wouldn't be leaving."

Frank Shirley, the head of the Committee to Keep Forsyth and Dawson Counties White -- who was repeatedly shouted down by other local residents on "The Oprah Winfrey Show" telecast from a Cumming restaurant Feb. 9 -- grew up in Atlanta, attending O'Keefe High School near Georgia Tech. A 29-year-old sign painter, he has lived in Cumming about three years, in the basement of Beverly and Mark Watts' home.

The Watts, who formed the Forsyth County Defense League this month, moved to Cumming from Warner Robins, Ga. "I didn't want my children to go to school with blacks. I don't want them to go through what I went through. My life was being threatened constantly," said Mrs. Watts, 24, the mother of two children. She said she dropped out of Southwest High School in Macon because of threats from blacks.

"There are black beauty pageants and black colleges. Why can't we have an all-white town?" she asked. "I feel safe going shopping at 9 o'clock at night here and don't have to worry about being raped by a black. If I lived in Atlanta, I couldn't do that. They've got downtown Atlanta; we ought to have the right to choose to live in an all-white community."

Many residents fear the city that enters their home every day on the evening news. "People around here have been taught to fear the black cause they're killing each other every day in Atlanta," said Parker, the Norcross factory worker. "My son loves Braves baseball, and he's begged me to take him to a game, but I hear people get mugged down there. He wanted to go to the circus, but I'm scared to take him."

Booming community

Whether Forsyth County residents like it or not, Atlanta is closing in on them.

When Lake Lanier was created in the late 1950s, the county's shore became a summer refuge for Atlantans, many of whom built cabins on the lake. (Often, a note on their door would warn them to leave their maid at home on their next visit.)

Then, a decade later, Georgia Highway 400 was completed, opening up Atlanta to the Forsyth County work force and opening up the county as a residence for Atlanta commuters. The county line is now only 15 miles north of Interstate 285 via Georgia 400, a short haul compared to the 90 minutes it used to take Forsyth residents to get into the city.

Sixty-three percent of the county's labor force worked outside the county in 1980, the majority in metro Atlanta. About half the 1980 labor force were skilled blue-collar or clerical workers. The 1980 census reported that 49.2 percent of the adult population over 25 had not graduated from high school.

The county's population has jumped from 16,928 in 1970 to a 1985 estimate of 35,600. The 1980-85 growth rate of 27 percent made Forsyth the sixth fastest growing county in Georgia. Its 1984 per capita income of \$12,358 ranked sixth in the state, and retail sales jumped 36 percent in just two years, from \$150.6 million in 1983 to \$204.8 million in 1985.

Real estate speculation is booming as good Forsyth County land has tripled or quadrupled in price in the past decade. Industrial parks and upscale subdivisions are springing up all over the county's south end, often creating a land of juxtaposition. The Polo Fields, a "polo and golf community" being marketed by Atlanta's Northside Realty, with homes starting in the mid-\$100,000s, sits adjacent to two old chicken houses.

Had been making progress

On the square in Cumming, some stores still close on Wednesday afternoons, yet traffic crawls at rush hour. (Pickups still abound, but BMWs are gaining.) The strip just south of the city limits has become a patchwork of fast-food restaurants and shopping centers with 24-hour grocery stores. But even there, the old and new Forsyth County can clash crazily. Shoppers may return to their cars to find white-supremacist fliers on their windshields, such as the one that billed the "White Power Rally" of Jan. 17.

Residents and civic leaders believe racial progress has been retarded by the events of the past six weeks. They said they feel the county had been evolving toward integration before Jan. 17:

Blacks were eating at Forsyth County restaurants.

Black performers were appearing at Lanierland Music Park without incident.

Integrated athletic teams had been playing Forsyth County High School teams for years. (Basketball tournaments with integrated teams were held at both the high school and at a junior high school Jan. 17.)

The county had successfully been the host of the "Up With People" singing group for five days last spring. Cast members, including 20 blacks, stayed in residents' homes. "We had more people call and request black kids to stay with them than we had black kids to go around," said Chamber of Commerce President Roger Crow.

Blacks came into the county regularly on construction and road crews, a black from Hall County worked at K mart and blacks had been working at Tyson Foods for five years.

Mary "Tiny" Byrd, 49, is in quality control at Tyson's. She and the other six black employees live in neighboring Cherokee County and work the second shift, so they travel in and out of the county in carpools, and they are occasionally the recipients of racial obscenities. She remembers a man this summer yelling: "Nigger, get your ass out of Cumming." She said she also hears the word "nigger" inside the plant, but "it's nothing to get in a fight about."

Sue McMickens, another black employee, said, "They white (employees) don't say nothing to me. They just look at me like I'm not human."

An uncertain future

Forsyth County is torn now, between those who would wash away the past and those who would return to it. The reaction received by Curtis Gease, a black Georgia Power Co. employee who was restringing lines in Cumming this month, is indicative:

"A lot of people have gone out of their way to wave. A couple have stopped and rolled down windows and said, 'Welcome to Forsyth County,'" said Gease, 37, who works out of Forest Park. But there have also been hostile greetings. "One guy drove by and said, 'Get out of town, nigger.' I guess the group who is causing trouble felt something was being forced on them. I don't think it's indicative of all the people, just because you have a few loudmouths."

The loudmouths have left the "good people" of Forsyth County -- who claim they are the majority -- fearing their cars will be vandalized if they venture into Atlanta with "Forsyth" on their license plates. They are frustrated, said editor Baggs, feeling helpless to remove the blot now on their county's name. Even President Reagan has cited events in Forsyth County as evidence that racism still exists in America.

"It's been 20 years since Selma," said Baggs. "But I still think there's nobody who doesn't think of race problems when they hear the word Selma."

The media is universally blamed for the county's sudden shame. "That first day (Jan. 17)," said Parker, "we should have busted every camera down there and kicked every reporter's ass."

Parker, like others, is also angry at the county leadership. "I didn't think I would ever see the day in this county that a white man protected a black man from another white man," he said. "I don't think any official should stand up and call us white trash." (Cumming Mayor Ford Gravitt called the Jan. 17 counterdemonstrators "white trash.")

"I've heard people say, 'They (government officials) might as well pack up. They're serving only one term,' " Parker said. "And I've heard people who never thought about joining the Klan talking about it. Churchgoing people."

Sheriff Walraven fears his county could become a racial battleground unless a white backlash is averted. "We are having a much more visible display of racial hatred now," said Walraven, 41. "The only time this will be over is when the vast citizenry of this county rises up and says constantly that this violence will not be tolerated. Once this middle ground says we won't tolerate violence, the problem will be over. Heretofore, the middle ground has been back home asleep."

Mashburn, the gray-haired, blue-eyed physician, was on the courthouse square the last week in January, while Hosea Williams was meeting with officials about blacks attending local churches that Sunday. Mashburn said he saw a girl in a parked car spot Williams, lean out the window and yell: "Go home, nigger." He figured she was 12.

That same week, two more serious outbursts of racism were reported to the Sheriff's Department.

On Jan. 28, a red pickup truck carrying three white men drove by a construction crew that was mostly black. A shotgun was fired out the window, away from the workers.

The following day, Marshall Mobley, a black truck driver for an Atlanta cabinet company, exited from Georgia 400 and headed east on Highway 306 when a blue Chevette pulled alongside of him. One of the four young white males in the car yelled, "Hey, nigger." Seeing the man was pointing a pistol at him, Mobley ducked. Two shots were fired. Another shot was fired as Mobley pulled off of 306 onto Parks Road. It too missed. "I think they shot up in the air, so I guess they were just trying to scare me. If they had meant to do any damage, they could have," said Mobley, 31, a northwest Atlanta resident and father of three children.

He had been driving the route for more than a year.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Starting at 35,600 in 1987, Forsyth County's population increased 600 percent by 2019 to 244,252, according to 2019 estimates. Between 2010 and 2019, it was the fastest-growing county in Georgia and the 15th fastest-growing in the U.S. With increased suburbanization, Forsyth's median annual household income also increased -- to \$104,687 by 2018 estimates, making it the wealthiest county in Georgia and the 19th wealthiest in the U.S.