

## *Interview of Robert Embry*

This interview was conducted by Fraser Smith of WYPR in June of 2007.

Transcription provided by John J. Schwallenberg of the University of Baltimore.

**Smith:** I am here today with Bob Embry of the Abell Foundation and we're talking about 1968: The disturbances, the riots, the civil unrest, whatever the terminology one might end up using. Could you just talk about your general recollections of all of that?

**Embry:** Well I was elected to the City Council in the fall of 1967 and became Housing Commissioner July 1<sup>st</sup> roughly of 1968. And I believe the riots were fall of 1968?

**Smith:** They were in the spring.

**Embry:** Oh in the spring.

**Smith:** Because it was right after the King assassination.

**Embry:** That's right, that's right. So I was in the City Council at that time. When you raise the issue about the riots, I was just trying to think from what vantage point I viewed the situation. And my council district was the 3<sup>rd</sup> which was then the 3<sup>rd</sup>, which was Northeast Baltimore which was relatively, if not, totally untouched by the riots. So my constituency at that time was not really affected directly. And I went down and drove through the areas where the riot was going on. Just to see what was happening, probably stupidly. Not probably: stupidly.

**Smith:** By yourself.

**Embry:** Yeah, by myself; just driving my car. I was single and I thought I should see what was happening as I was an elected city official. And I know in my parent's neighborhood who lived in North Baltimore a number of their neighbors got guns and had the view that their neighborhood was going to be attacked. That they were going to be attacked. That the city was out of control and that law enforcement had broken down. And at least in the small slice of the community that I sort of interacted with there was a great deal of apprehension.

**Smith:** Yeah. Did you get over to the Armory, to the 5<sup>th</sup> Regiment Armory where sort of the command post was?

**Embry:** No. I didn't have any official role in anything. It was just driving the streets.

**Smith:** So you, what your parents saw and what their neighbors saw and what you saw driving through there. Did you? Leading up to it did you recall feeling... there were a couple of days after the assassination when nothing happened in the city and some people thought: Well maybe we'll escape, maybe it won't happen here. Do you recall that?

**Embry:** I recall apprehension. There had been a number of civil rights issues: Open Housing issues. The 1966 gubernatorial election was um George Mahoney had won the Democratic Primary: Your Home is Your Castle. I know when I ran in the 3<sup>rd</sup> District for the City Council open housing which was referred to as the issue, in that community at that time, in the white community. And there had been a number issues about the community action The War on Poverty and opposition. The person I beat for City Council: John Pica, was the personification of opposition to African-American aspirations at that time. So yes there was a definite... Again I can't speak for anybody other than myself.

**Smith:** He was an opponent of African-American aspirations.

**Embry:** Yeah. He was sort of a personification of being against open housing of being against the Anti Poverty Agency which Parren Mitchell headed interestingly he recently passed away.

**Smith:** I think one of the reasons that some people thought Baltimore might escape, if not have less difficulty was the example that had been set by McKeldin. Who was way out in front basically on civil rights issues, quite early. And then I think people felt the same way in the black community, interestingly about Tommy D' Alesandro. They thought they really had some support there.

**Embry:** Tommy D'Alesandro, that's right McKeldin was a giant nationally on racial matters and Tommy D'Alesandro who had gotten elected mayor the previous year 1967. I tell the story: When I was running for City Council I went to a meeting out in Northeast Baltimore. The Taxpayers League which was out in almost in the far corner of the city and this group was a very conservative right-wing group. And I went to run for the council I was going to all these meetings. I went there nobody knew who I was. I was just sitting in the audience. I went there and they wanted to know why I was just sitting there in the audience and Tommy D'Alesandro was running for Mayor. This is Tommy D'Alesandro III. He was council President and running for Mayor he got up to speak and he was asked about open housing and he was, he didn't back down, he was for open housing. He was for African-American rights and it really has all ways impressed me all my life since then as one of a real profile in courage. There was no press there. There's nothing he gained out of not equivocating. And so in any event in answer to your question: The city had not had any leadership that was anti black the schools had been integrated without bussing so there wasn't all the controversies that had been going on in Boston. We had a poverty agency that was trying to do what it could so racial issues weren't really inflamed at the time.

**Smith:** Although as you point out, your opponent Tom Pico was running on that sort of Mahoney kind of platform.

**Embry:** True, I mean, I wouldn't say there's nobody. I don't remember when Swisher was elected States Attorney. I know that election...

**Smith:** That was later.

**Embry:** It was after that. But we didn't have the tensions that some others had. Didn't have the leadership that was sort of fanning racial hostility.

**Smith:** Do you think that what happened in Baltimore was an awakening of any sorts for whites and for blacks? You no the, we've heard different perspectives on what happened. Larry Gibson says that, if you ask people generically sometimes what they remember about 1968: Black people would say Martin Luther King was killed and white people will say there were riots. You know, I mean, as if...certainly...

**Embry:** I think that's accurate. Everybody views with small slice... What people think about one thing or another. But I think that from my recollection or view point, I think that is an accurate observation.

**Smith:** I have a friend who has lived in Baltimore for a long time and she says that, you know, her perspective was, being sort of unaware of civil rights issues or issues about economic problems in the black community. And then the first awareness that came to her were the riots. So, to her it was a bit of a set back. You know at a point where she might of started thinking somewhat more deeply about what was going on in her city. What occurred to her was: People are getting burned out of their houses or out of their businesses.

**Embry:** Well I do think again this would be subject to some polling data at the time about what most people thought about one thing or the other. But up until 1968, I think the view of the sort of uncommitted, middle class, generally benevolent, white citizen was shocked at what they'd seen going on in the South: Bull Conner, and the Freedom Marchers and civil rights workers being killed. Had a great deal of sympathy for the Civil Rights Movement and an again awareness of conditions they didn't see or think about in their life. And then the riots, civil disturbances came along and put a very new face on it: The Black Panther Face, the Stokely Carmichael face. Black power you know confronting and not going to take it any more and not sort of the Martin Luther King passivism. And what the white middle class reaction to that was in part the Nixon election and the southern strategy and the identification of the Democratic Party which had been positive during the sixties supporting the underdog is now caving into violence and unreasonable demands and I think there was definitely a shift in public... white perception.

**Smith:** Yeah. The um, I think a lot of black parents up until that time were successful in a way in shielding their children from the discrimination that was awaiting them. And you know counseled them on some rather cautious approaches to life. Because they realized what was out there; the kids didn't but they did. And then suddenly, of course, we had television, and that wasn't possible anymore. So it really was a time of real upheaval and peoples attitudes about what was going on.

**Embry:** Yeah. I agree.

**Smith:** Were you involved in what happened after the disturbances in efforts to respond to grievances that people had?

**Embry:** Well I became Housing Commissioner. A new Housing Department was created by the City Council. And Mayor D'Alesandro asked me to become the first Housing Commissioner which was in the summer of 68. So that one of our charges was Pennsylvania Avenue, was Gay Street, two of the areas that were most struck by this and a change in the

Urban Renewal process; because up until then, Urban Renewal really had traditionally not involved the community. It had been a plan that had been decided by planners. African-Americans which were overwhelming the residents of areas that were considered blighted or slums were, it was sort of self evident, they were living in bad housing we had to tear it down. There were no relocation benefits there was no planning with the community. And so from then on, the nine years that I was Housing Commissioner we didn't have a plan that went to the City Council it was proposed by the residents. They were all the resident's plans. They decided these houses should stay up, these houses should go down, we should fix these up, you know, where we should be, where this income group should be housed. And in public housing we formed a tenant's council. There wasn't any voice of the tenants up until that time. Public housing had started in Baltimore in the late thirties so were talking about thirty years of public housing with no tenant voice and we added a tenant to the commission, the Housing Authority Commission and created an elected tenant council from each of the projects. So yes, I mean there was a dramatic change. Now whether this was caused by the riot or by just an awareness of the injustices of the past, I can't say.

**Smith:** Well this was also... this was the period you know mentioned a minute ago that Parren was the head of the Anti Poverty. This was the era of maximum feasible participation of the poor.

**Embry:** Right.

**Smith:** And

**Embry:** Well that was prior to the riots.

**Smith:** Right yea.

**Embry:** In sixty-eight Nixon was elected and a the administration came in...

**Smith** Maybe part in reaction to that.

**Embry:** Oh yeah, I'm sure it was. And so the stress on this dramatically changed after the riots, nationally, in the national policy.

**Smith:** So the city didn't have any tenant councils or anything like that at that time.

**Embry:** Not before the riots.

**Smith:** So you instituted those afterward?

**Embry:** Yes.

**Smith:** How did they work? Was that participation beneficial?

**Embry:** Well it was certainly from the point of view of the tenants. Of course you'd have to ask them and those that participated. But, they were very, like some light had been turned on, that they were delighted to have their views sought and worked very well. I mean there

was some fiery meetings and people feeling their oats and some adjustments as to where what authority they had and what authority I had and each of the neighborhoods. I can remember there was a fellow named Norman Carol who dressed in African garb who at one Upton planning meeting came up to me, I think it was almost the first community meeting I've ever been in when I was Housing Commissioner. Even in my life time. Came up and lit a match in front of me and said: Embry the city's is going to burn and I was sort of taken aback by I was by this. But

**Smith:** This was after...

**Embry:** This was after the riots and... But I think that the was a 180 degree turn. Not just because of me or even primarily because of me but in the view of the consumer perspective being sought in these projects. The highway program which was another example was this wide swath of West Baltimore being torn down along the Franklin-Mulberry corridor really without any community input. And as time evolved again, not just because of the riots, but because of this change in view the highway, as such, was stopped, Rosemont and along now what now is the Martin Luther King Boulevard.

**Smith:** This was also the period... actually it was a year after. I'm not exactly sure when the report came out; but the Kerner Commission Report on Civil disorder...

**Embry:** It was sixty-eight.

**Smith:** Talked about, you know, two societies...

**Embry:** Nations. Right

**Smith:** Two Nations. Black and one white and increasingly separate.

**Embry:** Right.

**Smith:** That had some impact on policy I guess didn't it.

**Embry:** Yeah it was a national awakening and Baltimore just participated in it. I think we were further out in front than many places. But, every community had its own history. Baltimore, was as you know was a racially segregated city as you know. I was born in Baltimore, grew up in Baltimore. The movie theatres, restaurants, schools obviously and the department stores were all racially segregated.

**Smith:** Which reminds us all again, every time the subject comes up of, you know, of our good friend Walter and the decision by the school board to immediately desegregate the schools. I think that's probably another reason people thought that's why things wouldn't be so bad here.

**Embry:** Right.

**Smith:** What efforts do you recall were taken to restore small businesses along Gay Street and Pennsylvania Avenue after this?

**Embry:** Well we did the Old Town Mall which was the first inner city mall shopping mall in the country and the decision was made not to tear it down but: A to preserve it in terms to architecturally to preserve it but B try to keep shopping in the community but to also try to bring in minority shop owners. And loan programs were set up for African-Americans that wanted to open shops and the number of shop owners who were not native to the community who didn't want to come back and so there were stores available. So, it was basically unsuccessful. I mean it was a great attempt but the market conditions were such that the market for these commercial areas had disappeared. And there was growing movement of middle class African-Americans out of these communities and more cars were available so that they could go elsewhere and shop. And so it was trying to preserve history. Well intended but largely unsuccessful.

**Smith:** One of the other apparent vestiges, legacies of this was, immediate legacy was the unhappiness, anger, fear of the small often Jewish shop owner who thought either he or his relatives has survived the Holocaust and then suddenly, you know, were being burned out here. That kind of thing was another sort of thing that had to be overcome.

**Embry:** Yeah Herman Katkow who was the Chair of the Small Business Advisory Committee. He was Jewish and he still may be alive, I don't know.

**Smith:** He is. I saw him the other night actually

**Embry:** Oh did you. That's amazing all these years and of course, he could speak much more eloquently and accurately on that.

**Smith:** That's an interview we need to do.

**Embry:** Right. But yes, I heard that over and over again of the animosity of the Jewish community who thought they were performing a service, it's similar to the Korean-African-American experience today. And, you know, they knocked themselves out, they extended credit and so forth. In the view of the black community is: they were taken advantage of and why weren't these stores owned by blacks? The Jewish community wasn't preventing any black from renting a space and opening a store. Nobody was citing any specific discrimination in that regard. But the facts were facts and that's what people saw everyday as you walked down these streets.

**Smith:** Well one of the things that I think happened right after this was the formation of this group called the Baltimore Blues: Blacks and Jews.

**Embry:** Right.

**Smith:** Which I think still exists actually and, you know, has speakers and discussions. And I think currently is focusing on kids, you know, and still at work trying to...

**Embry:** Well something called CEBO was created, the Council of Equal Business Opportunity. Sam Daniels headed it for many years to provide loans and financial assistance

to African-Americans who wanted to start businesses. And that played right in to the same realization of trying to equal the playing field.

**Smith:** I remember you saying recently when I heard you speak at another venue, of growing up here and having not as much sensitivity to what was going on as you certainly do now.

**Embry:** None! None! We had a cook that was African-American and I had never met an African-American socially or it never entered my consciousness as to who they were, where they were what was going on. I would recommend this movie *Liberty Heights* to anybody who hasn't seen it about Baltimore in 1955.

**Smith:** The Levinson movie.

**Embry:** The Levinson movie about the year of the decision to integrate the schools and very insightful about the black-white and the Christian-Jewish situation in Baltimore at that time.

**Smith:** It was really sort of Old South in many ways. I mean the attitudes and the relationships with people. Do you have any sense of what how the black community related to police in those days? I mean these were the days of Pomerleau, I think and but I suppose irrespective of that, there was the usual antagonisms with the police or...?

**Embry:** I don't know. The...crime was not something that was on the...If you go back and look on the newspapers, crime was not an issue that was this is prior to 1968 and drugs were certainly not an issue, guns were not an issue. It's been a dramatic change in that regard over the last thirty, forty years.

**Smith:** What do you see as the overall legacy of this period? Was there sufficient response to it?

**Embry:** No. But I don't know what could have been sufficient. If you look back at the history of race relations in this country, I was just reading again there are hundreds of books obviously. I'm reading this book called *1919*, which is describing the year after the end of First World War and the treatment of African-American soldiers who came back from the First World War: the lynchings that were going on, the outrageous treatment of African-Americans, the ignoring of the problem. Lynchings, of course are just the tip of the iceberg. The humiliations, the daily humiliations and so there's this tremendous buildup of anger and resentment that had to explode, in some form. In many ways it's amazing that it's mild as it was. And there is no adequate response that can overcome slavery and overcome the years after slavery up until the middle of 1960's. But society has been moving, I think, in the right direction dramatically. The right direction but we're a long way, at least in my view, from where we need to be.

**Smith:** What kinds of things would you like to see happen? Or what would be your top three priorities now, you know, if we were to try to respond to these things? You know, as if 1968 were two years ago? What would we be doing?

**Embry:** Well, this is worthy of, you know, at least a years seminar course of discussion because the problems are so complicated. The difficult problem today is much more difficult than it was forty years ago. In that, forty years ago there were clear legal barriers to African-Americans getting jobs, getting housing, getting loans, getting education and they all, all most totally disappeared. So it isn't that we need to enact this program or take away this law that's discriminating. In many of the African- American Community who just needed those restraints removed. That was the only thing holding them back, have moved up and moved out of the inner city. So the African-American problem, while it still exists, is not so much a Baltimore County or Anne Arundel county or Howard County problem and you can take that to any city in the United States. The problem is of the community left behind and that community has a cultural problem that has been created by the non African-American community. That the ability to correct that problem and to address that problem without being paternalistic, you know is it: who's problem is that to address. You know, is there a problem. There are people who dispute there is a problem. There's no question that the out of wedlock birth rate and the employment rate, the marriage rate are dramatically worse in the African-American Community. So the question is: how does one address that. Now, a way of doing it is and whose job is to address it. You can say it's paternalistic of me to say what should be done. You know, that it's not my issue to deal with. On the other hand, it is my issue, in that my ancestors and to some degree me, I created it. One issue is the spatial concentration of these families in areas where the middle class has left. So that Harlem Park schools are worse for instance or Douglas today than they were in 1954. In 1954 before desegregation Douglas's school population and neighborhood was tone was set by the middle class African-American community that lived there. Who had middle class aspirations and today they've not totally moved but in many areas of the city there are schools where children with no college educated parent of any child in that school. And so, and very few fathers that are around and so your concentration not only racial discrimination but poverty discrimination. So you're sort of taking the problem to the second power. And so is it possible in those communities if those children are growing up where those norms are the neighborhood norms to break out of that and obviously there are middle class valued people in those neighborhoods but there overwhelmed by the street culture. So at issue is the concentration; but on the other hand, middle class people say: I earned my middle class community, if someone wants to earn it they can move in to my community. If they haven't earned it, I shouldn't have to subject myself to their problems. And so it's really an unanswerable problem. But...

**Smith:** Well one of the things that you've been working on or know about is the movement of some families out of this culture of inner city and dispersing people into the counties.

**Embry:** Right.

**Smith:** So, and what your left with though, in a way, is an even more concentrated form of the cultural problem your talking about.

**Embry:** Well that's right; because somebody's poor doesn't me they don't aspire to obeying the law and keeping their house clean and having their children educated. And if you're providing opportunities for people who want to move, who are poor to move, those people who choose to move probably have their act together and are not on drugs unable to address the everyday needs. And so yes their poor and yes they move into a middle class



neighborhood and yes their children do better than if their children had been left behind. But the mother who is on drugs, who doesn't know what the time of day is, who wouldn't be in their minds to apply to move out of their neighborhood for one reason not to have access to drugs, is left behind. So the neighborhood has lost the middle class poor and has the, I won't say lower class, but the value challenged poor population more concentrated. And so yes, you've saved and helped somebody's whose child who would have ended up in a gang or shot or dropping out of school, they'll make it and go to college and so forth; but somebody else is left behind. So it's a tough choice.

**Smith:** One of the other things that we get, I think, is the murder rate. You know the ...this culture in which it is increasingly acceptable, if not required, that you be... as Phil Leaf, one of the guys, you know, at the school of Public Health call hyper-vigilant. You know, if something happens to you, you respond to it right away; because you see it and recognize it as a threat to you. So you end up with the situation where people are increasingly willing to take somebody else's life. I mean there's just no interposing ethic or person who says: This is wrong, you're not...but you can't do this you shouldn't do this.

**Embry:** Well not only that; but it's a code of honor that somebody we was just talking today about somebody alleging that murders were caused largely by drug disputes. And expert in the area said: No that isn't the cause of it the cause overwhelmingly is somebody being disrespected and being offended and having their honor challenged. And this was true, to some degree, thirty-forty years ago; but it would be settled with fists and now it's not only settled with guns but semi-automatics. You not only shoot the person your trying to shoot but you spray bullets around the community and hit the three year old child sitting on the front steps.

**Smith:** No sense of responsibility not to do that. Can you...just going back a little to what you said earlier about your tour: What do recall seeing when you drove down through Gay Street?

**Embry:** Well it was like that all societal norms had collapsed. It... it was hard to imagine the controls being reinstated and you realized as you were seeing this how tenuous society is, that there isn't a policeman walking next to each person as they walk down the street. What's stopping them from taking a rock and throwing through a window, going in and taking it whatever it is the television out, lighting a fire and so forth. That most people are policing themselves and that when that assumption breaks down, one wonders how can it ever be restored? And it was a real feeling of anarchy and loss of control.

**Smith:** You know, Homer Favor and Marion Bascom were in here and Favor said exactly what you just said. That's how you felt you they were... Bascom was on the Fire Board at the time and they were driving, I guess in some official vehicle. But that's exactly how he described it.

**Embry:** Well Homer's a great pal and I'm flattered to see we see something the same way.

**Smith:** What new efforts have come along, since something like the City Fair? Have there been any successors to that? Maybe they didn't have the same sort of PR that the City Fair had, I don't know.

**Embry:** Well we started, our department started the City Fair. And right after the riot and it was to bring the white and black communities together, bring people into the city. Let the middle class people let them understand that it wasn't chaos and terror and that, you know, ninety nine percent of the time things were fine. There were plenty of people like themselves who had the same values happened to be a different color and live in a different part of the city. I don't know that there's any successor effort, maybe I'm missing something that I'm not aware of but the I don't know of any comparable...I don't know that one is needed. I mean the tide is turned the tide was running out from the city for not just after the riots but a little after the Second World War and the demographic tide has shifted so that the middle class population is now moving back into the city. And so I don't know that the black-white tensions are anything comparable to what they were. There are many more interracial couples when neighborhoods integrated and people worked together married so forth. So I don't know it's the same issue.

**Smith:** Given the continuing nature of some of the circumstances that people live in, do you think there's still possibility for a riot of this kind to happen again?

**Embry:** I don't see the... what I see is not the black-white feeling of injustice of the black community, although again, I hesitate to hold myself out as an expert on what an African-American person thinks about things. To me it's more of a crime issue today than, you know it's gangs, it's African-American on African-American is really the outrage that I hear in the African American community is how to we protect ourselves from ourselves? Not from the white community. I mean there're people that think drugs are there because it is a conspiracy of the white community to supply drugs but...

**Smith:** And you would still have people who would argue that the legacy or that discrimination is not over and you know opportunities for people are still not what they should be.

**Embry:** Oh absolutely! But if somebody's able to spot a discrimination then it's confronted and addressed and people are ashamed or embarrassed that somebody would of pointed it out. So I don't hear...

**Smith:** Which is a major difference that's hard for us to to perceive or to see now because it's not there.

**Embry:** I mean before, people would point out that the law school doesn't admit blacks or this doesn't admit black people say that's the norm. Why would it enter your mind? I was accused of being I don't know if I should say this word an n-lover. You know when I ran for City Council. And that was, you know, somebody that was a criticism that was sort of unanswerable. Well today if you said that, you'd say well of course you know you love African-Americans that you love whites or Jews...

**Smith:** Sure.

**Embry:** ...or anybody else and so the whole climate has changed dramatically.

**Smith:** Janet Hoffman told me that back in the sixties when Tommy was the Mayor, she would advise him not to go to Annapolis when they were working on important bills for the city, because his reputation was what it was outside the city.

**Embry:** Right

**Smith:** And he wasn't an asset you know. In fact it was it was the opposite of that.

**Embry:** Absolutely absolutely.

**Smith:** Well I think... Well let me just ask you if there is something about all of this that I didn't ask you that I should have asked you.

**Embry:** No, no. I think the tough question you asked and something that I deal with every day in my job with the foundation: is what to do about the situation. And because of this cultural issue I mean that we have job training, we have drug treatment, we have school programs and so forth but the problem is as I say is much more complicated than it was in 1968.

**Smith:** Yeah.

**Embry:** As it's improved.

**Smith:** Alright. Yeah. Oh, OK. We need to have you say: I'm bob Embry I'm the Head of the Abell Foundation I've lived in 1968 I was.

**Embry:** Yeah I'm...My name is Bob Embry I'm presently and have been for twenty years, the President of the Abell Foundation here in Baltimore and I was a city councilman from the 3<sup>rd</sup> District in nineteen... when the riots happened and then shortly thereafter I became the city's first Housing Commissioner and served in that capacity for nine years

**Smith:** And you've lived in Baltimore?

**Embry:** I was born in Baltimore and lived here all my life. Went to public schools.

**Smith:** Good. Thanks.