

*Interview of Homer Favor and Rev. Marion Bascom*

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:** Reverend: King's planned visit. It was going to come to Baltimore. Do you know what my Director's talking about here? A planned visit by the Reverend King to come here. Prior to t what? Prior to going to Memphis. Was that a plan?

**Bascom:** That doesn't strike me.

**Smith:** Well.

**Bascom:** I think going to Memphis was something when they found them in trouble they imposed upon them and he broke his schedule to go to Memphis. Now whether he was supposed to come here first or where. But he was not supposed to be there; that wasn't in the schedule.

**Smith:** Let's cover some ground I know we need to cover. I want to talk a little about the meeting with then Governor Agnew. I don't know if you were there. You may have been there. I know Reverend Bascom you were there. And one of the first things you told me when we talked years ago was that and I think it might have been when you were walking into the room. It was either walking into that room or some other room it might have been that one because of what he said. He looked at you and he said something like: You disgust me.

**Bascom:** No to be more specific, he said: Every time I see you I'm repulsed by you. By which I answered: That's a problem you'll have to overcome. That was done in his office at Towson. Vernon, Frank, Robert Newbold and I were there. We had been brought there by Robert Newbold who was Mister Republican during those days. And it was at that time that we had an unfortunate wrestling of words.

**Smith:** So, but you were there later. Weren't you on that day?

**Bascom:** Oh yes.

**Smith:** I know...

**Favor:** Let me interrupt you briefly.

**Smith:** Sure, sure.

**Favor:** I am always late much to the chagrin of my dear friend here. So that day I was trying to get there. I was running late and the news came on and they went on to say that Governor Spiro Agnew had they didn't say cursed that's what it meant, out the black leaders and had humiliated them and tried to set them correct etc. And so I said um, I wasn't even at the meeting yet, it hadn't started. It was scheduled for for say twelve o'clock and this news was at twelve. So I went in and said: Wait! This is a trap! A trap! I called Parren a side. Marion, I said it's a set up. I explained to them that they already given news clippings that he's going to cuss us out. And the cameras were up there rolling so. Verda Welcome say's no! No! We don't... I said let's leave! Let's leave! No! No! Let's stay and hear. That's the only reason we stayed.

**Smith:** I think Juanita Mitchell was there and she stayed. Because I think she wanted to hear the rest of it.

**Favor:** Well that was what was said.

**Smith:** Enough people did leave, right?

**Favor:** No, what happened...

**Smith:** Well a few people left, I think.

**Favor:** Well a few I took them out and then they went back after they insisted and we'd hear them out. We stayed that would have never happened. That's the point I'm trying to make.

**Smith:** I see. I see.

**Bascom:** I think it's fair to say that it happened so spontaneously quickly. Until it's all most difficult to be overly specific as to the immediate logistics of what occurred. One thing I know: That we were seated there an um... We had been brought in by a young black PHD who was Secretary to Agnew. I can't think of his name. But at any rate the room was pretty much full. And it was at the State Office Building; I think on the fourteenth floor. At any rate when Mr. Agnew preceded to begin his diatribe against the Black Community... I don't know who got up first. But I know there was a ... an unusually amount of unrest that just shook the room. And um, I guess before I knew it I was on my feet walking toward the door. I do remember Juanita specifically saying: I'm going to stay. But I'm very sure that from there we walked around to Douglas Memorial Church where I served then and had a meeting. It's unfortunate that we did not write some of these things down. As Homer has become an Octogenarian of sorts. Much of this we did not write down with great specificity. But the fact is: Some of us went and it seems to me that Mr. Levi who was President or Vice President of the Mercantile Bank a number of others of us went to Douglas Memorial and had a lengthy discussion as to our resentment. And I guess the rest is fairly vague to me. This is one of the reasons we so often need to sit down and recollect.

**Smith:** The... On of the things I wish you would comment on is the very difficult position that you were in. You were accused of not helping quell things. Meanwhile you're out there in the street at some risk to yourselves, I would imagine. And ministering to people who are outraged about has happened happened to King. And being seen, probably from that quarter, as being to compliant with what officials wanted you to do and on the other hand you're being upbraided by the Governor who says you're not doing enough.

**Bascom:** Well the notion of a Scapegoat is gone way back into Jewish history out in the wilderness. And Mr. Agnew needed a scapegoat the State of Maryland needed a scapegoat. So we were the scapegoat to go out to be driven into the wilderness. Because the state and the city had failed so miserable to do so many of the things that they should have done. That's about as far as I can go with it.

**Favor:** Well actually, me personally never took him seriously. He was an empty vessel, he was a pseudo intellectual. He ah an effete snob and that kind of nonsense. But he had no substance. I remember one time I put my finger right in his nose and told him what I thought of him; because he was so small.

**Smith:** You know I think your perception of what happened there is right on.

**Favor:** I remember that like it was yesterday. I was the one who called them out.

**Smith:** Tommy D'Alesandro told me that he had urged Agnew not to do this. And I said: What do you mean. He said: I saw a copy of what he intended to say. So apparently they released it even before you know people got into the room. Tell me what you saw on the street when things were pretty ah pretty hazardous their on those two or three days when the city was burning.

**Favor:** Let me say Marion was Commissioner, first black Commissioner of the Fire Department.

**Bascom:** Fire Department.

**Favor:** And they pull up in front of my house and the town was burning in a jeep and say: come on let's go. So I say: I'm going to risk my life, my family, for this. And we remember Martin Jenkins telling Jim Rouse, he said: We can not expect to live comfortable amidst all this despair, this dissonance and disharmony and it might blow at any time. It's like a bunch of dirty rags. So than when it blew, here we are going out trying to... It was like when I was in the military I had no idea when...I had never thought when we were out there Marion that we would ever see a peaceful day. That's how it was. When will it ever quiet? I mean I didn't... There was no solution. So we saw...

**Smith:** At the peak of it you were...

**Favor:** Right. We saw a lady; a lovely lady nondescript had two or three children. And they knocked a window out to a cleaning shop and next door was a liquor store. She had the bottles of liquor and they had the clothes that they took out of the cleaners. We spoke to them and they said: Mind your own business.

**Smith:** What could you say? What did you say?

**Bascom:** I don't think you could say anything but to deliver your presence there. The terrible stench of smoke that could be seen across the city, vandals loose in the field. And of course I'm not going to curse out those vandals anymore than I would curse out the Irish or any other group who find it convenient to get things for free, the same thing that happened in New Orleans. And essentially you have to remember, you don't have to but I suggest that you remember that people who have lost a kind of savior discover that he has been brutally murdered who had such high hopes. You know most people forget that during the time of Martin Luther King. There were there were high hopes in the country and it was when they had crucified him that hopelessness reigned supreme. I suspect that's about as much as I can say about it, other than

**Smith:** You know I heard about what day? About the day of the assassination what do you remember?

**Favor:** I remember walking into my dining room and my wife telling me that they had murdered King and I cried like a baby. Cried like a baby because I said: when when is this going to stop; the killing of the prophets? When's it going to stop? A story I'm going to share with you. I never said this publicly. I might be making a mistake; I hope not. But Jim Rouse was a very dear friend of ours he called me within a week of this and I had learned that down at the Morris Mechanic Theater people, business men were there someone was showing the dogs that could be used to control people, guns and all that. So he said Homer: if I showed you a picture of one of your cohorts, compatriots torching a building would you believe it? Would you do anything about it? And I didn't know what to say to him. I respected him, I loved him so finally it occurred to me I said: Jim I'm sorry you asked me that. I said: because I feel unclean because I didn't burn down a building! These people were protesting the brutal treatment that we got and I did not participate in it. So I don't know and that was the end of the conversation.

**Smith:** Gibson tells me that when you ask people about 1968. This is a generalization and not true across the board but he says: If you ask white people what happened in that week: they say there was rioting in Baltimore and if you ask black people what happened they say: Somebody killed Martin Luther King.

**Favor:** I never revered to it as riot it was civil disturbance. Riots you go after people. You cut off the heads of pretty little young girls, you shoot and stab and cut anyone. We didn't do that. They just lashed out in despair. It was a disturbance. I never called it a riot.

**Bascom:** I would agree with you and suggest even further that um... When people lose all hope you expect them to behave hopelessly. And you'll remember that those were the days when corner stores and corner liquor stores invested the black community and liquor that would cost, whatever it would cost at a given point would be far different from liquor in the inner city. So then you're talking about a people that were stripped bare. Who expected to act as if they had achieved something in the death of Martin Luther King. You ask me how I felt. I felt hopeless. You ask me how I feel today. And though there are those who have made it I still have a sense of hopelessness and helplessness. Because, until the nation decides to act grown up and to put it's energies on educating and housing we can expect this to happen again.

**Smith:** So if we look back we can't say we made a tremendous amount of progress...in some areas we have but in the areas you're speaking of we haven't made a lot of progress.

**Favor:** Well you know in the midst of this Marion. You recall we had these discussions this goon squad...

**Bascome:** Ah hum.

**Favor:** And I said we are celebrating. But the enemy quote unquote has hired the best and the brightest formed them into think tanks and an oxymoron that's one to crank out a vile destruction of a people known today as the Heritage the American Enterprise Institute and on and on. And so while we are celebrating they are redrawing. So what do we have now the Neo Cons and they've come back with... We've had this assault upon Affirmative Action. As black people we never benefited by Affirmative Action. White females did other minorities did. We got a smidgen. But it was our blood, our sweat and our tears that got that. So what we see now is a massive effort to turn back the clock.

**Smith:** Did you ever think the Civil Disturbance had the opposite effect that it might have had? That it that it might have sent people into sort of a retrenchment and a reaction against civil rights?

**Favor:** I sure some people said they're looking for anything right now. They look for things to support that which is wrong. So a kid kills a kid out here on the corner here tonight and I find that abhorrent. So does Marion; he has to bury him. But I can't curse those kids because they were put on that corner by public policy. There daddy's worked at Sparrows Point, Martin Marietta, Armco Steel, Crown Cork and Seal. Where are those jobs now? And we're over there exploiting people making beautiful clothes for us to wear, working round the clock, kids can't go to school and we're exploiting labor there and we're exploiting labor here. So we tell those kids to go to work, doing what: flipping hamburgers. Two jobs no benefits. Go to the military be what you can be. You get your guts blown out. And so now when they stand on the corner, if they are on my corner and you sitting here overtaking my corner. I say if you kill them, I'm going to kill you. Bam! Bam! All this is related to drugs. The jails are full of youngsters related to drugs. They give our youngsters... You have to have a hundred times white cocaine in order to get the amount of time you get for that much crack cocaine. That's racist it's classist, it's absurd, it's in humane. But that's what there doing. I know it the media knows it but we've corrupted the media. When I saw Ted Koppel and the rest of the riding around on the trucks saying they were imbedded. They were talking about figurative. When I say literally they were imbedded.

**Smith:** Laughing... O, right, right. When Tommy was in here talking to us on the same subject and he said that first of all there was the general hope that, I think because of McKeldin and because, because he had been somewhat more liberal and willing to talk to people that maybe Baltimore would escape the difficulties that were sweeping the country. And for a couple of days it looked like that would be the case.

**Favor:** We did escape in 67 that's when the other cities burned.

**Smith:** Right.

**Favor:** So we were relaxed it's all over. But they came along in 1968 Bobby Kennedy got whacked and then Martin Luther King got whacked and boom! It exploded.

**Smith:** And the other part of that though was that: There hope I guess in the bunker down there in the 5<sup>th</sup> Regiment Armory was that if you got to Sunday and people went to church that might also be something that might calm some people's unhappiness.

**Bascom:** But what they didn't understand was that Sunday belongs to a few worshipers that there are far more people out in the streets on Sunday mornings than in church. Sunday would not solve the problem. It would take something more deeply entrenched.

**Favor:** Marion you remember our Good Friday service?

**Bascom:** It was at your church.

**Favor:** That year all the Mayor and everybody else came to that Good Friday service. The next year it was diminished. The next year...

**Bascom:** It was diminished.

**Favor:** Well one thing I'll also say: We settled the garbage strike. Tommy D'Alesandro was the Mayor. Remember Marion we sat in there all night long?

**Bascom:** In the City Hall. All night long.

**Favor:** They brought goons in from...

**Bascom:** All over.

**Favor:** New Orleans to fight the workers here. We said you're not going to spill any blood. We stayed there all night long. Any Tommy will tell you, we settled the garbage strike.

**Smith:** Do you all... You were in the street a lot when this went on. Did you ever see any indication that there were outsiders involved?

**Bascom:** No

**Favor:** I never saw anything like that.

**Bascom:** I never saw anything like that. What happens in Baltimore pretty much happens anywhere else. Baltimore was a replica of what happened all over the country: New Orleans, Miami, Birmingham, Washington, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, you name the city. It was a spontaneous outpouring of frustration and pain. So it was not something that could be localized as a Baltimore thing. It was bigger than Baltimore. It was a nationwide thing. I don't think Sunday morning could of saved anything.

**Favor:** Our response was to tighten the laws, mandatory sentencing, build more jails, bring back capital punishment with a zeal. And all those things create a worsening situation. So the James Baldwin's prophecy becomes alive: The fire next time.

**Smith:** I heard Judge Watts say once that in the area of despair and hopelessness if you looked at the at *Brown v. The Board of Education* which was supposed to be the end of Jim Crow and all the wall to wall discrimination that existed in the country and it took all those years for the country to start to comply with the Supreme Court. If, you know, if people don't even pay attention to the Supreme Court, you know, what do you expect. But, but to see people willing to come out and shoot the leaders of the people are trying to create a new world.

**Favor:** Well C. van Woodward looks at that period. The noted historian.

**Smith:** Strange career too.

**Favor:** And he juxtaposed it with the Reconstruction period following the Civil War both lasting twelve years; both raising hopes and aspirations. Both of them dashing. Tilden-Hays Compromise in the first instance; the election of the 90<sup>th</sup> Congress in the second. And so once that happened the hope that that were talking... *Dante's Inferno*

**Bascom:** Inferno

**Favor:** Over and above it (garbled) hear ye all he who are without hope that's what hell is. When you no longer have hope you are in hell! And so what's happened is they came back and began to figure out ways we can be more punitive; what ways we can be more rigid. Not how we can solve dwell at the table of brotherhood never. No where in there thoughts.

**Smith:** Right, right, right. There was a, there was a lot of discussion with Dr. King about tactics. You and Dobson, maybe others I don't remember. I think you were one of the ones that went down to Florida. Like where's this movement going.



**Bascom:** Ambassador Four. There were four hotels there on the quadrangle. Vernon was there. Robert Newbold, Harold Carter, Wendell Phillips. Those are some of us who went to Miami. I would say that: that was a fruitless meeting. Because for the first time the Young Turks were in the process of taking over the ascendancy. And Martin Luther...

**Smith:** The more militant?

**Bascom:** Yeah.

**Smith:** to use a more common understandable term.

**Bascom:** Yeah. Dr. King as quiet from the group as possible. This was when Daniel Moynihan was caught up in the fray down there. But the important thing is that: In those days the...The Young Turks who were in charge. I would say Jesse was a part of the Young Turks, it sort of held up Martin Luther King in abeyance. It was only when Martin Luther King got to the podium that his power became evident. Did I mention Vernon Dobson having been there?

**Favor:** Yeah

**Smith:** Yeah.

**Favor:** Yeah Frank Williams.

**Bascom:** Frank Williams. Because we were all roommates. You have to remember that this was a time when the crucible was quite hot and the Bunson Burner was quite blue. And things were going toward the end. But in essence that was not a definitive meeting. It was a meeting where we tried to find ways and means by which the movement would continue. It was not until the final night of our meeting, the night King spoke and overpowered the Young Turks who there to pretty much disparage him. That's about all I can remember.

**Smith:** King had been here when McKeldin during his second term had an open accommodations bill. It wasn't the first one, Henry Parks had had them for some period of years. But actually, let's see was Tommy the President of the Council then and they met in the Lord Baltimore Hotel. Box Harris took him up there. Took Tommy D'Alesandro and they had a meeting and Dr. King asked him what's happening with this bill. And you know he sort of gave him a Baltimore political lesson: This amendment here is going to lock up three votes over here you know what I mean.

**Bascom:** Uhmum

**Smith:** Unfortunately it was probably paring down the effectiveness of the bill but it was you know real politic. You got to get the votes you know so, maybe you didn't get a complete bill but you got a bill. So, that was one of the first times King was here I guess.

**Bascom:** Yes, it was one of the first times and of course there was also intrigue in our community. I remember he was supposed to speak at the Masonic Temple one day and the Baptist Preachers got a hold of him and took him first to Faith Baptist in East Baltimore. I'll have to start thinking about this more. As you talk I had forgotten about that but there was a lot of intrigue...

**Smith:** Would you have been there that day when D'Alesandro went over there?

**Bascom:** Ah hu. Yeah.

**Favor:** Fraser, I would like to suggest to your listeners: Make an effort to listen to King's speech at Riverside Church. And when you're listening instead of Vietnam substitute Iraq. It's just as cogent today as it was then. Secondly, I like to say that people ask me why King was assassinated. And I say: It wasn't that, it wasn't what he did in the struggle. When he said to Americans: All ye who are alienated and dispossessed meet me in Washington: that was his death knell. Malcolm's death knell when he said: I've been to Mecca, I've seen blue eyed blonds whom God loves and I love them too. With the charisma and power of those men. That was their death knell.

**Smith:** Was Parren... We could maybe end with just one quick question. Some of the stories have recently said that Parren was maybe only or the most effective sort of liaison between the Black Community and Official Maryland and Baltimore. Was that right or were there others?

**Bascom:** I can't think of anybody being more important to the life of Baltimore than Parren. You just mentioned Henry Parks who was a powerful person in this community and you remember also which I think many people have forgotten: that it was Henry Parks who provided his refrigerated trucks to go to Washington to

**Favor:** Poor People's Campaign.

**Bascom:** Poor People's Campaign. To preserve the food so that salmonella might not run rampant. So there are a lot of names...

**Favor:** If you restrict that to politics I agree. But I can't agree. There were other people, like him for example. Like other people like Marion here. Vernon and Frank Williams I mean these people could get the... I remember Carl Murphy used to send out a call at ten o'clock in the morning. A diminutive little man. He'd sit down at this huge desk and you're looking at him. And everybody from everywhere came so he was part of that. But he was not the at except for...

**Bascom:** his leadership

**Favor:** His leadership from a political standpoint.

**Smith:** Did the riots.

**Bascom:** did the disturbances.

**Smith:** the disturbances, upheavals the bereaving in the street. Did it exacerbate tensions between blacks and Jews in the City? And if so, how was that ameliorated over time?

**Favor:** I would all most say no.

**Bascom:** *I would say no.*

**Favor:** Right. I would say no. Because, you see, we were accused of it. We were accused of it just like we had this program where it came out look at it this way and someone called in and said we were anti-Semitic. So we said; pull the tapes. They couldn't find a single tape. So people want to say it but the reason was once we got the 7<sup>th</sup> Congressional District and it was obvious that were going to continue, they ran somebody that we didn't select and we beat them. They ran the district instead of north-south they ran it east-west. Because I couldn't vote for Parren the first two times. Because I live of the East Side. I wasn't privileged to live on the West Side like my friends.

**Bascom:** That's good. Well

**Smith:** OK you're very kind I appreciate it.