

"Realtalk"

February 28, 1977

Interview with Fluker Walton

by host Booker T. Scruggs

Gift of Booker T. Scruggs, 1982

PREFACE

This manuscript is a transcript of an interview conducted for the Oral History Project of the Chattanooga-Hamilton County Public Library. The purpose of the project is to capture the first-hand accounts of the social history of the Chattanooga area in the twentieth century.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that the transcript reflects the patterns of the spoken, rather than the written, word. The information is presented as it was recalled by the interviewee at the occasion of the interview and has been edited only for clarity.

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010 Good afternoon, I am Booker T. Scruggs, and welcome to this the final in a series of broadcasts concerning black history here on "Realtalk" as we come to you on this the last day of February, which is designated as "Black History Month." We certainly hope that each of you enjoyed the three previous black awareness programs: first, with Mrs. Fanny Lou Hamer; followed by federal communications director, Ben Hooks; and last week, you heard an address by Nashville senator, attorney Avon Williams. This week we're going to bring matters just a little closer to home as we discuss the black history of Chattanooga and Hamilton County. Our guest is Mr. Fluker Walton, Sr., who has lived in Chattanooga for the past eighty-six years, and who loves to reminisce about what many called the "good old days." But, how good were they, especially for blacks, compared to today? We are going to find out now as we meet Mr. Fluker Walton, Sr., with a discussion of the black history of Chattanooga and Hamilton County.

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Scruggs: Well, Mr. Walton, we'd first of all like to welcome you to "Realtalk." We understand we are going to find out some real information concerning black history, especially here in Chattanooga and Hamilton County; some history that maybe most of us aren't really aware of. Sort of give us a little introduction as to basically where you're coming from in terms of this, and how long you've been around in Chattanooga so that we can know that you are actually telling the truth in some of these things that you've actually seen. Exactly, how old are you and where were you born, and just any other information you might want to tell us.

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Walton: Well, now I tell the people about my age, just add ten to the year and you have my age.

Scruggs: Okay, but you are from these parts around here in Hamilton County.

Walton: I was born in South Chattanooga on Jefferson Street in 1890, and I was raised here. I've been away from Chattanooga only about one year's time.

Scruggs: We're going to talk primarily about blacks who were in political office and the education field, and some of the lifestyles of blacks back in those days, and maybe some of the differences that you see now from those particular days. Let's first of all get into politics; that seems to be a subject that affects all of our lives. What about blacks in politics and the beginning of blacks in politics, as you remember it?

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Walton: I don't remember the year but our city government -- before we got the city commission we had mayor and aldermen -- and all the aldermen were elected by districts, and one of the aldermen

(Walton): was a black man, Hiram Tyree. He was the same as [is in] the commission form of government now; that was in Chattanooga.

Scruggs: Approximately what year was that?

Walton: Well, I don't know; I can't remember; I don't remember what
042 year it was. I don't remember how many times he was elected, but the city commission form of government went in at 1911.

Scruggs: You say you don't remember how long he served in office. Were there any other blacks after Mr. Tyree?

Walton: Not in the commission form of government, see. Johnny Franklin was the first black in the commission form of government. But when the county was being run by the Judge and County Court, and the County Court consisted of districts -- I don't know the year -- but three blacks were seated in the County Court. They had the same duties that the County Council has now. Squire Burge had a house built on Ninth Street just below Douglas; upon
056 the top was J. G. Burge. Now, that's been many a year. The next one in County Court was Squire White; he was Bliss White's father. That was in the city. In the county there was one Squire Nelson, and he was from out -- they did the same thing that the County Council is doing now.

Scruggs: I see. Now, even before this time, do you have any recollection, or have you heard persons say when the first blacks actually settled in the Chattanooga area, and exactly what they did?

Walton: The only information I have into that is from my grandparents. So far as Chattanooga is concerned, I don't know, but my grandfather was freed as a slave out in Jersey and Bonny Oaks. Most of the work they did was farm work. The only public works they had along that time was the rock quarry, the fertilizer factory, and the railroads; that was the section hands.
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Scruggs: How far can you trace your family back? Have you ever done this?

Walton: Back to my grandfather and grandmother.

Scruggs: Were they here in the Chattanooga area?

Walton: I didn't try to trace any further.

Scruggs: But they settled here in the Chattanooga area, is this right?

Walton: They settled in Jersey, out in Bonny Oaks if you want to put it close, right around Bonny Oaks.

Scruggs: Then, Bonny Oaks was not a part of Chattanooga; that's basically what you're saying.

Walton: No, that's the county; see, that was county.

Scruggs: Okay, let's talk about some other areas, the field of education. Of course, I guess you remember old Howard School that used to be over on Eleventh Street, and I believe you may remember it before then. Is that right?

Walton: I remember Gilmer Street's. Few people realize but that was 077 Eighth Street. See, it was Howard High School, but it wasn't Howard High School per se, because they had all grades. That was on Eighth Street right below the First Baptist Church. I remember that; I went to school there, two years there, and then they moved over to Eleventh Street, and I finished there.

Scruggs: Were there any other schools, any other high schools that were primarily for blacks during that particular time?

Walton: No high schools. The only schools in Chattanooga at that time were Montgomery Avenue which was later turned to Main Street, and then Howard High School.

Scruggs: Now what years, once again, are we talking about in terms of Howard High School being on Eighth Street?

Walton: Let me see, I think I was thirteen years old when I went to 088 Eighth Street School, so that must have been probably 1903. Professor Henry was the principal of Eighth Street.

Scruggs: Were most of the faculty members there black, or did you have white faculty?

Walton: All the faculty members were black, all up until integration came in.

Scruggs: In approximately what year?

Walton: What's that, when integration came in?

Scruggs: Yes, you're speaking recently now, aren't you?

Walton: Yeah, recently.

Scruggs: What about the Carver School? I heard some mention about Carver 096 School being around here also, not Carver, but Lincoln, Lincoln School.

Walton: Lincoln High School was out in the county, and it was over here -- I can't say definitely where it was, but it was over here in Churchville, see. The county, they didn't have a high school for blacks, you see. That's the reason when I finished high

(Walton): school -- I mean I finished eighth grade when I was living at Tyner -- I had to come to Howard High School because I couldn't go to the high school at Tyner, the white high school. I had to come. But my mother and father were living in Chattanooga, and I came to Howard High School. It was on Eleventh Street then, and that was 1906.

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Scruggs: Okay, we've also heard some talk about Tennessee State, which is now located in Nashville. [It] was almost located here in Chattanooga. I believe you can tell us some circumstances as to exactly why it's not.

Walton: Two good reasons why, the politicians got in. The city was asked to appropriate so much money. They went together and found a spot east of the ridge, but some of the politicians were holding up some of the ground to get more money for their pocket, and that's why it didn't come to Chattanooga.

Scruggs: So what eventually happened then? Was it then taken to Nashville or what?

Walton: They went to Nashville with it, yes.

Scruggs: Okay, what about the field of medicine? We understand that at the turn of the century there were some black doctors here in Chattanooga which really haven't been recognized, and many people do not know about them. Maybe you can tell us a little bit about that.

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Walton: Well, now let me see -- Dr. [George] Macker, the dentist, office on West Ninth Street; Dr. [William] Valentine was a dentist way back. The black medical doctors -- there was just quite a bunch of them. One, Dr. W. A. Thompson, built the building at the corner of Ninth and Palmetto. He was a prominent Negro doctor and a politician. Dr. [J.C.] Tadley was a prominent Negro doctor; he built the Tadley Building on the corner of Ninth and Douglas Street. The building, I think, is a two-story building there, and he built an apartment house back of Ninth and Douglas Street. Dr. [N.B.] Callier had a right smart of property through Chattanooga. Dr. [E.M.] Brown lived up on East Eighth Street. Dr. [T.E.] Taylor lived up on Eighth Street. Of course there's a young Dr. Taylor now.

Scruggs: What about the hospitals? Did most of them have their practice in a predominantly black hospital at that particular time, or was there one available?

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Walton: The Walden's Hospital at the corner of -- after they moved the Eighth Street School from there. Dr. Wheeler -- there was two Wheelers, Mrs. and Mr. Wheeler; they were both doctors, and they

(Walton): established Walden Hospital at the corner of Eighth and Douglas Street. It was patronized by blacks and occasionally some white would go there.

Scruggs: Was there another hospital in the area then for those white patients who needed medical attention?

Walton: Erlanger Hospital and West Ellis Hospital on West Ninth Street, 141 and Newell Hospital where it is now. I think those were the only hospitals at that time.

Scruggs: What about Carver Hospital?

Walton: Carver Hospital was what we used to call the West Ellis Hospital, and it was especially for whites, but something happened -- I don't know what happened -- so they broke up, and then the Carver Hospital, the blacks took that over.

Scruggs: I've just heard a lot of talk over the years about Carver as to inadequate facilities that they had and so forth. It was a pretty bad place, right?

Walton: Well, I was never in the hospital over there, but I used to see it going up and down Ninth Street. But, you see, it was originally for white people, and I don't know -- something happened there, and it broke up or something, so the blacks took it in.

Scruggs: 153 Okay, what about the Jim Crow law and how did it affect Chattanooga back in the early nineteen hundreds? We've heard about Jim Crow and exactly what happened in terms of sitting in the back of the bus, and so forth and so on. What are some of your memories at the turn of the century concerning this?

Walton: My memory, the best that I can bring it to the forefront, is that someone asked me about riding the streetcars, and my memory was that you could ride the streetcar anywhere you wanted to sit down on the streetcar, until this Jim Crow law. Now, I understand, I mean I can't be positive about it, but I understand there was a legislator from Georgia, James Crow, and he traveled through all of the Southern states' legislatures and had that law passed then that there would be separation. But the whites and blacks were so intermingled back in my young days that we didn't know a black man from a white man, the children playing together. We had vacant lots. We'd play ball. We'd ride bicycles. White children and colored children [were] playing together, until that law came in. And then that brought a little division.

Scruggs: 171 We would like to remind our listeners that you're listening to "Realtalk" over radio station WNOO, and our guest is Mr. Fluker

(Scruggs): Walton, Sr. Our primary emphasis today is on the black history of Chattanooga and Hamilton County. Mr. Walton was born in this area in 1890, so he's just sort of reminiscing and talking about some of the situations as they have existed throughout the years. What about the merchants in downtown Chattanooga during the early part of the nineteen hundreds? Were there blacks participating in the economics of the city at that particular time?

Walton: There were merchants, there were stores, there were grocery stores. If I had the time to take you, I could take you through Chattanooga and show you buildings that were built by black people for black merchants, and grocery stores. During that time several black barber shop owners catered to white customers. One was on Market Street, Bill Hixson, just out from Main Street. There was another one on Market Street, corner of Hooke Street, Gene Taylor; there was another one on Market Street, right in front of the Hotel Patten, John T. Drain. There was one on Market Street at the corner of Ninth and Market with black barbers catering to white customers. At the Flatiron Building on Georgia Avenue there was a black woman, Lil [Lillian W.] Richardson [who] had a beauty parlor that catered to white folks.

Scruggs: You've mentioned all these particular situations where blacks were really in the mainstream of things, and I guess all of a sudden -- not all of a sudden, but throughout the years this just sort of changed a little bit. When exactly did this kind of a thing change, where you had no more blacks operating stores in the downtown areas, where you had no more blacks participating in the political structure, and so forth, of our city?

Walton: I don't know just when, but it was gradual. I do know that the clerks that we had in the stores, they began to get greedy, and that precipitated a lot of it.

Scruggs: What about theaters and movies at that particular time?

Walton: Well, there was three black theaters in Chattanooga. I don't know the year. One was on West Ninth Street. Dr. Macker, a dentist, had a motion picture show where it used to be [called] "Five Points." J. P. Easley, a prominent lawyer of Chattanooga that we don't hear much about had one at the corner of Ninth and Houston Street. The two Conyers brothers -- one of the Conyers turned out to be a doctor [James G.], I'd forgotten to mention his name -- had another on Ninth Street; it was run by blacks and for blacks. I think [what] caused their demise was not too many black people were making motion pictures at that time.

Scruggs: Okay, what about the construction of churches in our city? We understand that there have been blacks who have been instrumental

(Scruggs): in actually erecting churches and various other establishments here in Chattanooga that many people just do not know about.

Walton: I know of one, especially, and then partly of [a second] -- Wiley Memorial, [and] the First Baptist. I know the First Baptist was built by slaves -- they started a church. And I know Wiley Memorial was built by blacks. At that particular time the rock masons and the brick masons only made a dollar a day, but the other laborers down below, some made fifty cents and some made seventy-five cents a day. They built those churches and maintained them for years. Speaking about building, at one time there was a brick mason, contractor, Dan Anderson. He built just any number of apartment houses and dwelling houses in Chattanooga. He had a crew of men working for him; he was a black contractor. At one time there was a black man, Fralix, when we had to move houses, he had moving houses [in the city].

Scruggs: Mr. Walton, what about the area of sports here in Chattanooga?
243 Were blacks real predominant in the sports field, or what was the situation there?

Walton: I don't remember the year, but at one time we had a black Southern League in Chattanooga, and through the South. We had the black Lookouts; we had the black Crackers; we had the black Barons; we had the black Pelicans; and it was established that when the white Lookout team was playing somewhere else, the black Lookouts were playing at Chattanooga, and that was [at] the old Andrews Field. I don't know how many years that continued, but that was at the time that the great Satchel Paige developed here in Chattanooga. He was playing for Chattanooga. Some years after that, the Industrial League was established here in Chattanooga by some sports-minded people. I think we had eight local teams in Chattanooga; they just played Saturdays and holidays. One of the teams, the Three C's, I think, was down here at Orchard Knob and Blackford Street, its home. The Lincoln Giants' home was in Lincoln Park. The Fort Cheatham home was in Fort Cheatham. There was one team, I don't remember what it was, out at Murray -- that was the Three C's [at] Murray Field. Some of the manufacturing people sponsored the team, but those boys never received any money from playing the games, and a great number of times, well almost all of the time, they furnished their own equipment, suits, and things like that, just to have Saturday afternoon baseball games.

Scruggs: Okay, what about entertainment -- Bessie Smith and Roland Hayes -- they were real prominent in terms of being from Chattanooga in the entertainment world. Do you remember those individuals and do you remember the acceptance that they received, or the non-acceptance that they received here in Chattanooga as they grew up?

Walton: They received acceptance, but in those days, those times, the Negroes, the blacks, didn't have great facilities to patronize those folks. The only theater we had in Chattanooga that was comparable to doing anything like that for the blacks was the Liberty Theater. Now Mamie Smith is another great singer there's not much said about -- [it's all] Bessie Smith. Roland Hayes, he was really accepted; that was the entertainment. Now you come back to sports -- if you want to get any definite information about some of the sports we had here in Chattanooga -- Cicero Henderson -- now he was a pitcher, but he left here and went up north somewhere and played with some big teams up there; he'd tell you about sports. When I was at Sunday School I played basketball in the First Baptist Sunday School basement, and Wiley Memorial. All the churches had basketball teams, and they played in the basement, and that was to keep the young boys off the streets.

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Scruggs: That was your recreation center then, huh?

Walton: Well, the biggest recreation center that I remember when I came here in 1906 [was] the YMCA, on Linday Street, it was on "A" Street then; they called it "A." Right across [from] the city hall; the city hall was at Patten Parkway at that time, and the YMCA was there, and we had courts and everything. Of course, we had croquet and lights in the back for our different recreations.

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Scruggs: Mr. Walton, we would like to thank you very much for relating these situations to us as we look into black history of Chattanooga. Very briefly are there any unique experiences that you can relate to us that you have experienced growing up in Chattanooga?

Walton: Some experiences that I've had that I would like to relate -- we're talking about weather now -- I've seen the time in Chattanooga where the snow would be so that you'd be riding up and down the hills with sleds. People with horses and buggies would take the wheels off of the buggies, put runners on them, hitch them to horses and ride all around town.

Scruggs: Once again, our thanks to you for your information concerning black history of Chattanooga, Mr. Fluker Walton, Sr.

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Walton: Okay, thank you.

Scruggs: This concludes our segments on black history, and we certainly hope that you have been somewhat enlightened throughout the month of February, as to the accomplishments and the concerns of many of our black Americans. Our thanks, once again, to Mr. Walton for being our guest as he is to be greatly commended for the splendid recall of facts which he shared with us today.