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Interview with Edward "Ed" Harris, Brenda Dow, and Sylvester King

Edward Harris

Brenda Dow

Sylvester King

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**LOUISE PETTUS ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**Interview #296
HARRIS, Edward**

HARRIS, Edward

Brother of Edward K. Harris II,

Secondary Interviewee: Brenda Dow, Mr. Cy King

Interviewed: May 16, 2013 11:10 am

Interviewer: Robert Ryals

Index by: Erica Robertson

Length: 02:18:18

Abstract: In May of 2013 Mr. Edward Harris sat down and discussed his brother, Edward K. Harris, who was a part of the freedom riders. Mr. Harris also discusses his military service and his tour of duty in Vietnam. This interview was conducted for inclusion into the Louise Pettus Archives and Special Collections Oral History Program.

Keywords: Sharecropper, African American Education, Southern Family, Heath Springs, South Carolina, Segregation, Freedom Riders, KKK, Vietnam, PTSD

Interview Session (May 16, 2013): Digital File

Time Keywords

00:00:00 *Start of Interview*/Interviewer's Introduction

00:02:55 *Question:* Mr. Harris when were you born? *Answer:* April 2, 1948.

00:03:04 *Question:* Who were your parents? *Answer:* Mr. Roby Harris and Mrs. Carrie R. Harris.

00:03:23 *Question:* Where did you grow up? *Answer:* Heath Springs, SC.

00:03:33 *Question:* How many brothers and sisters? *Answer:* 6 brothers, 3 sisters, one brother left.

00:04:00 *Question:* Please share any childhood memories about your parents. *Answer:* Father couldn't read or write, very well known, was a sharecropper for many years. My mother, sweet little old lady, secretary of church, sixth grade education, still smartest in family, siblings in college would call and ask how to spell a word and she could spell it.

00:08:30 [No Question] Mr. Harris still discussing brothers and sisters; one of which was put on chain gang for dating Caucasian woman at the time. Brother Herman was always reading and writing.

00:09:12 *Question:* Why did you? *Answer:* (Cy King) Yes, at this moment is what he revealing emotional? *Answer:* (Edward Harris) A little bit, a little bit, but I need to talk about it to get over it, to let it go. But it is a little emotional, I started out with six brothers and now I only have one. One educated brother, the others were very successful in life, but they were not educated.

00:10:28 [No Question] Still discussing family. Sister Marie was born with clubbed feet, probably had roughest life, childhood spent in wheelchair. (Mrs. Dow): Wasn't your father a minister? (Edward Harris) No, no, Herman was a minister. Willie was very religious but he wasn't a reverend

00:13:05 *Question:* (Cy King) What was the names of your sisters and brothers in order? *Answer:* Curtis "Oh the order is going to be hard" Hazel, Willie, Janie, Charles, Bessie Marie, Roby Harris II, Dorothy, and me, Edward Harris. Dorothy and me we talk daily, we're still very close, she lives in New Jersey.

00:14:47 *Question:* What was it like growing up in Heath Springs? *Answer:* "Well it was peaceful, there was nothing there, still is nothing there. We didn't know anything we had a black and white TV set and had to turn the antenna towards Charlotte or Columbia to watch something. Growing up in Heath Springs, I didn't experience racism, I knew it was there but I didn't experience it in Heath Springs. Now if I went to Lancaster and wanted a fish sandwich, I had to go to the back door." Heath Springs was peaceful, we went to segregated schools; Heath Springs High and Hillside High. Didn't experience stuff like the KKK or cross burning in the yard, which was why my dad was so upset when my brother was out there stirring up stuff. (referencing dating Caucasian girl)

00:16:09 *Question:* Earlier before the interview you referenced a picture your mom told you appeared in a paper, could you share that? *Answer:* That was a picture in a newspaper or in a magazine in a magazine, and she showed me that picture when I came home from school. My dad walked in and said "I done told that boy to leave them people alone, he gonna get us all killed; gonna get himself killed and the rest of us killed". My dad was worried for his family, even though I didn't experience racism, that doesn't mean it wasn't there. My dad did his best to exist in the "system" and I guess he was afraid everyone would find out his son was out there stirring up trouble, my dad knew everyone in the town.

00:17:50 *Question:* And this was something that occurred when your brother was involved with

- the freedom riders? *Answer:* Freedom riders, yeah. At the time my brother lived in New Jersey, but he was in school at Morris College. My father like I said, not being educated, didn't know very much about anything, he didn't have book knowledge.
- 00:18:25 *Question:* And what had happened to Herman, what was the incident your father was referring to? *Answer:* What happened to Herman? I guess being involved with the freedom riders he "got known" by maybe the KKK and "they took him out down there in school at Morris College and carved KKK in his chest and arm along with a cross" Was a newspaper story, thinks it was in Charlotte Observer but can't find the article. That was what my dad was upset, well not upset but afraid. Harris continues talking about his father and what he knew about his brother Herman, he knew he was stirring up trouble as he called it. "He didn't know why and the meaning behind why my brother was doing it"
- 00:20:35 *Question:* Interviewer discusses interview Herman gave in 1979 about the "contrast" in his generation and his parent's generation as it pertained to racism. Asked Edward same question, adding was it Herman's way of initiating change? *Answer:* "I think it actually, the man who created slavery was a very smart man, take their name, take their food, and keep them dumb. Herman was first to go to college and learned a little something, knew the condition his parents lived in wasn't right, and what happened to my brother Hazel wasn't right." I think he took it upon himself to do something about it. Edward discusses more about his brother Herman and his education. Talks about how he never got a chance to talk to his brother about these things, cause he didn't know anything either "I was a dumb little boy". Talks more about how his family did know what was going on in the world and how Herman was exposed through college had a better idea of what was going on. Edwards goes on to discuss his brother's involvement and how he learned more about what he did by "googling" his name on the internet. Didn't know he was "somebody" to be mentioned with names such as James Farmer, John Lewis, Fred Shuttlesworth, Martin Luther King Jr. that kind of blew me away. (Brenda Dow) "then there was the book about the freedom riders" (whole conversation is about 3 minutes long)
- 00:23:53 *Question:* About how old were you when Herman was involved in these different type activities? *Answer:* In Ebony magazine is a picture that we pulled up on the internet, I looked at the picture and said "that's my brother? I didn't even know what he looked like at 21" Couldn't remember him really being home, Herman was always away at school, doing something, did a lot of writing. Like I said "we don't know our history until it's too late".
- 00:24:52 *Question:* Did Herman ever write any letters home to your mother or father? *Answer:* He wrote home quite often. Discusses why he would write home and his mother more. Talks about Herman and his writing how he would come home to ask his

mother to spell words and talks more about her ability to spell words, even when she didn't know the meaning of them.

- 00:26:53 *Question:* Were their people in Heath Springs or throughout Lancaster county that would ask you about your brother? *Answer:* "No" Talks about the incident where KKK and a cross were carved into Herman's arm and chest and how the paper was removed from the library because the teachers didn't want the kids seeing it. Also discusses how others didn't want it (the incident) to get out and the family to get hurt. "They didn't want any gossip to get out" "They were protecting the family, they didn't word to get out, this little boy from Heath Springs, SC was taken out by the KKK and carved with crosses and KKK on his chest" His sister says the paper was the Charlotte Observer, but can't find the article.
- 00:28:41 *Question:* What about your experiences growing up in Heath Springs, where did you go to High School? *Answer:* "Hillside high school so did Herman, it went from the 1st to the 12th grade". Talks about how he went to school in a little shack, called Mt. Carmel before going to Hillside, but how the teacher actually babysat him because he was too young to go to school.
- 00:26:53 *Question:* What did you do upon graduating High School? *Answer:* "Well, I was going to go to college, but I got drafted, I got that letter...Greeting from Uncle Sam" Talking about his service in Vietnam and Japan; finishing up his military service in New Jersey and how he stayed there. Discusses entering the military and how his mother helped him through that.
- 00:31:58 *Question:* What was your first station over in Vietnam? *Answer:* (Did not understand what he said when talking about where he landed) He discusses riding about 30 miles in the dark, and how he was scared. Talks about his duties at Camron Bay, "guard duty with no ammo and an obsolete weapon" Was shot in the leg, went to Japan for 3 months and went back to Vietnam. "It wasn't as bad as it may seem, Vietnam made me who I am today". Mr. King and Mr. Harrison talk about him being shot in the leg how and when that happened. Actually shot in the arm first, sent back in the field and then shot in the leg. Mr. Harrison continues talking about his experience in Vietnam.
- 00:37:30 [no question] Still discussing time spent in Vietnam. Mr. King and Mr. Harrison discussed how they were sent out to draw fire and if they were fired upon they would call in air strikes. Mr. King: "Who is Snoopy"? Mr. Harrison: "The WWII plane sent out to detect enemies before we went in. "When Snoopy's detected activity we had to go out and find it" Discussed difference between North Vietnam Regular Army and Guerillas. Talks about how many times a week he went out for battle in Vietnam. Continues discussing Vietnam, and how intense it was to land in the rice paddies.

- 00:41:36 *Question:* Mr. King: “You were serving your country for the time that you did over there, when you got back here you find out your brother underwent abduction, carving and all of that” *Answer:* “Actually that happened before I went over there, but I didn’t know about it” Mr. King: “But now that you know about it” Mr. Harrison: “Well actually I knew about the carving, I was in High School, probably about the eighth grade or something when my mother showed me that picture” “When I got back here my brother was out of school, reading and writing and uh the one thing that disappoints me about my brother, he died too early” Discusses how everyone knows his brother, but doesn’t know what he did. “That’s why I am here today” Talks about how he can mention freedom riders in Heath Springs and no one know what it is.
- 00:43:49 *Mrs. Dow:* And see he was one of them on that bus, in Alabama that they burned. *Answer:* “Yeah he was on that bus, they all were on that bus to Aniston Alabama.
- 00:44:22 *Question:* During your one year tour of duty, did you ever feel any element of racism? *Answer:* “One thing that happened in Vietnam was survival. Whatever problems we had at home wasn’t in Vietnam” “If you were racist in Vietnam and you were beside me, you liked me in Vietnam” Discusses how he would run into racism when they were having “fun” Tells a story about his r and r in Bangkok. Discusses how the military brought the racism over there, and put that attitude in place.
- 00:47:20 *Question:* How long were you in the hospital over there? *Answer:* “Three months for my leg injury” Again they then discuss how he was shot, and the aftermath. Talks about the tragedy he saw when he was in the hospital, guys with no legs etc. Discusses how he raised his clenched fist towards that flag like the African American Olympians. “They questioned me and what saved me from going to jail was there was another black guy there, a lieutenant or a captain who had had a nervous breakdown came in and said “no I did that, he’s taking up for me, that’s my friend” He told me let me take the rap for this, I had a nervous breakdown they can’t do nothing to me, but they’ll hang you”
- 00:50:14 *Question:* Why do you think you did what you did (in reference to raising the clenched fist)? *Answer:* “I had read and heard about John Carlos and I was proud of him and back in that time especially in Vietnam, that was how we recognized each other”. “Looking back on it though, that was a dumb thing for me to do, when you’re wearing that uniform you agree to not disrespect it, and by doing that I was disrespecting it”. Discusses how the captain he didn’t even know saved him, and kept him from going to jail. Doesn’t remember the name of the captain that saved him, continues to discuss the events of that night.
- 00:53:53 *Question:* So you were placed back in your unit after you were discharged from the hospital? *Answer:* I went back to Vietnam and my unit (inaudible) I went to Saigon

- to get AWOLS, it was a good job. I should've gone home, but because of the incident (clenched fist) I think I had to go back to Vietnam.
- 00:54:49 *Question:* Mr. King: "Is that when you were awarded a purple heart" *Answer:* "I got two purple hearts, a bronze star I got that a couple of days (inaudible) from Japan" "I thought what's this for"? Discusses how he got the two bronze stars for the three months he was on the line. "I ain't gonna say I became no hero, I got brave" Tells a story about how the new people coming in and how he volunteered to walk point. Tells more stories about his time in Vietnam and how they were always wet, and couldn't find a dry spot anywhere. Talks about the guy who saved his life twice while in Vietnam, (silence for a few seconds, Mr. Harrison is crying) "I don't know if this man got a medal or not, he should have, but I was too dumb to put him in for it" (Mrs. Dow can be heard consoling Mr. Harrison and saying no). Mr. King: "There are a number of things that you are revealing here, that are exceptional to me, and I put you in the same category as your brother, Herman K. Harrison different times, but extraordinary service". Mr. Harrison: "I appreciate you saying that, but I put my brother a little higher than me, cause there was no reward for him. That's why I want to let as many people as possible know, so he can get his reward". Mr. King continues to pay respects to both brothers.
- 01:07:00 [no question] Mr. Harrison continues to discuss Vietnam, retelling stories he has already told. Along with how Camron Bay was safe and he will never forget the smell in Vietnam. Advanced to SGT E5, says he was promoted because of survival. Says he hasn't seen his medals since Vietnam, "I came home and didn't take them out the suitcase"
- 01:09:59 *Question:* Let's talk about life after you came home from Vietnam. *Answer:* "I was crazy; I didn't know I was suffering from PTSD till 2006". "I got out of the army in 1970, started working with the post office". "37 years later neighbor saw my plate, purple hearts and said why don't you come on over to the VA and apply for PTSD" Discusses how he struggled with PTSD and how angry he was and how he should've been fired. "Everyone was afraid of me because I was crazy, and I thought they were crazy for thinking that" Discusses how he goes to group meetings every Tuesday, and admits if it weren't for that group he wouldn't be able to talk about it now.
- 01:14:58 *Question:* "So what was it that was a turning point for you, that made you want to address this problem" *Answer:* "One trip to the VA, to realize that I wasn't the only crazy man out there, I remember my first day in a room of 150 guys thought I was going to tell them a story they had never heard before, but every one of them experienced the same thing". Talks about how it wasn't publicized and how guys today are suffering from PTSD and don't even know it.
- 01:17:33 *Question:* "Do you think part of the rationale was that survival mode, it was

- still...” *Answer*: “They programmed us to be killers, and we had to go into survival mode, and when they let us go, they didn’t deprogram us”. “Uncle Sam wrote the mothers letters and let them know this is not the same boy that left home”. Says didn’t know if his mother got one. Mr. King interjects and says that Mr. Harris is not crazy, it’s PTSD, and how he saw two people in his life that were crazy and Mr. Harris is not crazy. The conversation about Mr. Harris thinking he’s crazy continues. Mrs. Dow interjects, that what he did when he didn’t know he had PTSD wasn’t crazy. Conversation continues with Interviewer discussing why Mr. Harris wasn’t/isn’t crazy. Conversation continues about the difference between being crazy and PTSD. Mr. Harris discusses how he distrusts the government. “I saw a lot of stuff at the time I didn’t know I was seeing” Mr. Harris discussing his time in Vietnam.
- 01:28:12 [no question] Conversation about differences of being crazy and PTSD continue. Discusses how he doesn’t know if this would’ve ever come out had he been at home in Heath Springs, because he didn’t live at home.
- 01:31:29 *Question*: “Ed did you ever keep in contact with any members of your unit”? *Answer*: “That’s another emotional point for me too, at the time all I thought about was coming home”. Discusses a “scrapbook” “guys sign it, but we only put our nicknames or last name”. Didn’t get phone numbers or addresses, I didn’t even think of it. Discusses the name of his unit with Mr. King, a lot is inaudible. “US53528351, was my service number” Continues the discussion of his service and where he served, was in boot camp etc.
- 01:38:52 [no question] Continuing discussion about Mr. Harris’s service. Discusses how he didn’t go home while in basic, cause he couldn’t afford to get home.
- 01:40:12 *Question*: Mrs. Dow: “What did you all do as a family”? *Answer*: “Went to church and visit aunt nanny” Mrs. Dow continues trying to get him to answer. “Maybe ya’ll don’t understand, we were sharecroppers, we were poor as dirt, and my dad might take my mother to see one of her aunts or his niece”. Discusses how family went to camp meetings at church. Mr. King asks about army discharge date. Mr. Harris believes it was in November. They continue to discuss Mr. Harris and his service. Discusses how he would like to find “White” the guy who saved him two times in Vietnam.
- 01:46:31 *Question*: “What are you in pursuit of now in regards to Herman K. Harris”? *Answer*: “I want to let somebody know who he was and what he did”. Speaks about a book Herman was writing at the time he died but doesn’t know what became of it. Wants people to know his name like they know James Farmer, John Lewis, and Ralph Abernathy. “They wouldn’t associate him with the Freedom Riders; they would associate him with Clinton College.” “In Lancaster he’s known as butter breads

brother, that's my nickname" Discusses how he at least wants his classmates from school to know what he did. Mr. Harris wants to print a 4-5 page booklet so people can know who his brother is.

- 01:53:35 [no question] The conversation about what Mr. Harris would like to do in regards to his brother continues. Mrs. Dow discusses how she found Herman's name on the internet and how proud she was to show Ed what she found. Discussing how they can preserve his brother's legacy, his own legacy, his family's legacy.
- 01:58:55 *Question:* "When you retired from the post office, is that when you moved back to South Carolina"? *Answer:* "I lived in the most expensive county in New Jersey; I couldn't afford to own anything at the time". "That's why I moved back this way; my mortgage payment is about \$300 less than rent in New Jersey".
- 01:53:35 *Question:* "How did you all meet"? *Answer:* "Through the gym" Talks about how he sold real estate because he was bored once he retired. Says his experience in Vietnam made him who is today. "I would have been dead or in jail if it weren't for the army". Discusses how people need to travel and see places, and how most people from the area (Lancaster, Heath Springs) haven't experienced life. Discusses how he witnessed 9/11 from his post office in New Jersey. Conversation turns back to making sure Mr. King has all of Mr. Harris' army information correct and White who saved Harris.
- 02:15:22 *Question:* "Do you have any concluding comments that you would like to add" *Answer:* "I hope I covered some ground and I was legible when I was talking" "I hope people understand what I was trying to say, in my closing statement, I'm proud of my brother".
- 02:18:18 **End of Interview**