

Voices of 1968
Notes from an Oral History Interview

November 7, 2018

Audio-recording studio, Multimedia Services and Collections
University of Delaware Library, Museums & Press
Newark, DE

Interviewee: Clinton Perkins

Interviewer: Tahira

Notetaker: David Kim

Technical support: Nico Carver

Additional notes: Rebecca Johnson Melvin

Note: lengthy comments/questions throughout by Tahira

[Settling in conversation before interview begins]

02:31 Schools attended in Wilmington: elementary school at Mary C.I. Williams (4th and Monroe Streets), Bayard Middle School (junior high), Howard High School, two years at Del State, then came out after two years

04:00 around 1963 and Civil Rights era – knew of Dr. King from television, remembered marches and speeches, remembers the Poor People's March

05:00 ... the one when people slept outside in the tents – Perkins was there. Some confusion about when, but remembers he was about to get out of high school, it was around graduation, remembers he gave up his prom night to go there, this was about the struggle, it was important. [Resurrection City was the tent city built up for the Poor People's Campaign on Washington in May-June 1968. MLK had called for many to join him there, but he was assassinated in April. Resurrection City was occupied for 42 days, until evicted on June 24, one day after permit expired.]

06:21 Objectives of the struggle: some of the same things as now: equal opportunity, discrimination, police brutality, housing

07:30 Doesn't remember "redlining"

07:37 Remembers being in the tent, rainy, muddy, 18 or 19 years old. Poor Peoples March had already been planned and continued without Martin Luther King

08:35 Doesn't remember when he heard the news or where he was when MLK was shot. Remembers the sadness

- 09:40 Reaction around him eventually came to riots. Peace rally organized by high school students was to be held at Rodney Square, around 10th and Market Streets. Everyone was walking toward Rodney Square (reference to photograph)
- 10:30 Perkins was there – on way to rally – was about between 8th and 9th Streets when the photograph was taken – doesn't remember if photograph was before or after rally
- 12:07 Remembers fires on West Side, Molotov cocktails. There was shooting, white people got pulled from cars in some neighborhoods and were beaten. Stores owned by white people were targets of fires but black people who lived in houses next to stores got burned out too
- 13:20 Tahira quoted MLK: riot is the language of the unheard; what has American not heard? The plight of the Negro poor
- 14:40 Limited ways to express self. Marching was saying, "Listen to me now."
- 15:20 Agrees with MLK's non-violence message to a point. Would try non-violence first.
- 16:55 No recollections of how police interacted with citizens, no recollections from this time
- 17:40 Remembers his own arrest, but he deserved it because he was breaking the law. He was stealing.
- 18:20 This was when he was around 12, was sent to Ferris School for Boys. Was there from age 12-13 and again at age 14
- 18:45 Reformed self for his mother, didn't want to put her through troubles
- 19:24 Remembrances of National Guard occupation in Wilmington, had never seen anything like it, military occupancy in a city. Guard was there for 9 months
- 20:00 National Guard was there to protect the business owners on Market Street, not the residents
- 20:52 Occupancy of Wilmington then is like what he sees on television now – the street patrols in Afghanistan
- 21:00 Curfew was required. Reminds him of slavery when you needed a permit. You had to have a reason to come out, either work or school

- 23:50 Doesn't remember how it felt to be "occupied"
- 25:50 In retrospect, thinks Governor Terry feared another uprising, but it may also have been just continuing oppression
- 27:00 After election in November 1968, transition from Mayor John Babiarz to Mayor Harry Haskell, from Governor Charles Terry to Governor Russ Peterson. Terry would not release the Guard after he lost the November election. Peterson was pressured into releasing the Guard immediately after his inauguration; community leaders said his inauguration would be protested if he didn't
- 28:19 Two brothers, two sisters in Perkins family. Doesn't remember family interest in the April events or civil rights. He was the only freedom fighter, the only rebel.
- 29:48 What others should know about 1968 – that photograph was only a sample of what was going on. There were many others, good people. People wanted equal rights, were tired of oppression. Took a lot of courage to be out there. People risked being shot, beaten, killed. Some things did change for better.
- 31:15 Housing got better, there were police hires, schools got better. You can only hold people down for so long, then people will fight back. Freedom fighters.
- 32:10 They were just school kids in 1968. 17, 18, 19 years old. Perkins was 19 and he may have been the oldest one there. Tahira: Ella Baker, executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, believed in young people to lead, to say "we had enough." Perkins was only a teenager in April 1968, was ready to graduate from high school in June.
- 32:30 Looking at a photograph – black men standing near a car, near Eastlake and Riverside, near Cherry Holly, on North Side, near Governor Prinz. Names: William Robertson, Warren Mowbray, Allen Steed, James Barber. People affiliated with the Black Panthers
- 34:44 Discusses gangs. Blackie Blacks were from the Valley (on the West Side). There was a different group from the Hilltop, around Broom and Clayton Streets. The lower West Side was the Valley, around Madison, Monroe, Jefferson Streets. The Blackie Blacks were a small gang, were part of the uprising.
- 35:15 The Black Hawks – not much of a gang – were from Southbridge
- 36:40 Perkins was in the West Side gang, around Second or Third Streets and Poplar Street; they all hung together. Was around 17 or 18 then. The Jay Hawk gang was on Hilltop, mostly just hung together.

- 38:30 West Side and Mountain Dew – those were two gangs. Mountain Dew was from the North East, Riverside. The Barber boys got in trouble. One was AWOL from the military and the FBI came to arrest him. The FBI agent got beat up.
- 39:45 The Cherry Island incident was used as an excuse to go after WYEAC.
- 40:17 Tahira: new release of information about a government program: Co-Intel-Pro, covert intelligence program, to disband black leaders, to go after the black messiahs of the period
- 41:05 Perkins's experience as a resident of Wilmington, in spite of all the unrest in 1968, was that he enjoyed Wilmington, had fun there, even in school and enjoyed hanging out. Maybe had too much fun in school. Even at the Ferris school, there were counselors and teachers who were good. His father had left when he was young, so there were male mentors who were important in his upbringing.
- 43:55 Remembers acquaintance Gene Hammond. Hammond was like a lot of guys Perkins grew up with: intelligent, skilled, could have been somebody – not like Obama, but maybe somebody like Jesse Jackson or Al Shaprtton. Hammond came out around Black Power. Remembers seeing Hammond speaking in front of a group of people and being impressed.
- 45:38 Talks about other people in the photograph. Charles Benson could do any kind of dance, really talented. Dwight Davis ran for office. One person (not giving name) had deep-seated hatred for white people.
- 47:12 Remembers other people from Ferris. A kid named Larry Simpson talked about stars and the planets and that really impressed him. Lonnie Wise had great vocabulary and Perkins admired the way he expressed himself. Made a record and release it on WDS in Philadelphia. William Hines was a three-way athlete.
- 49:13 Discussion with David Kim about the photograph of the black men walking down Market Street on the day of the peace rally at Rodney Square. The photograph that Perkins had is from same event, but different frame, than the one frequently reprinted in the News Journal. The one that was published most often shows angrier expressions.

Perkins realizes this year, with all the attention on 1968, that this was an important event and important time to many people.