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from Archives: Local News Updated: Monday, January 21, 2008

Local man recalls encounter with Rev. King
His sister-in-law's refusal to go to the back of the bus resulted in her being injured. The Rev. King came to visit her in the hospital.

By ALFRED DIAZ of the Union-Bulletin

On a train trip from San Antonio, Texas, to Biloxi, Miss., a young U.S. Air Force communications trainee started to get hungry. The 18-year-old airman was headed for Keesler Air Force Base, still hours away.

"They had a car on the train where you eat. So when it was time to eat, I got up and headed for the car."

But the year was 1956, and the airman was an African American by the name of Herbert Fisher.

"The porter, he was also a black man. He said, 'Hey sir, you can't go in there, I will get you what you need. Just don't make no trouble.'"

There was a slight bitterness to Fisher's voice as he told his stories of what it was like living in the South during the 1950s.

"They had everything labeled. White. Black. White. Black. It was tough. You had to stay on your side of the street," said the 73-year-old Fisher during an interview from his Walla Walla home.

"You couldn't look them in the face when you talked with them. Because if you did, they figured you were out of control."

But there was one man who did look them in the face, Fisher recalls.

"I respected the Rev. King," he said, noting that he had met the civil rights leader.

So when the 18-year-old Fisher finally reached Keesler Air Force Base, he found himself facing more racial problems.

"I was the first black in Keesler Air Force 0-6 to learn communication," he said, noting he was trained in top-secret, encrypted air-to-ground communication.

"When I got to the base, they sent me to the order room. So when I got there I went to the order room, the sergeant said 'Boy what can I do for you.' I told him I was assigned to 0-6. I showed him my orders. He told me to wait. He went back and talked to the lieutenant. And the lieutenant came back and said 'They must of made a mistake. This is Biloxi.'" Fisher said, noting that racial tensions were worse there than in his home town of New Bern, N.C.

"Then he (the lieutenant) went back to make a call. I could hear him, 'Yes sir. No sir. I will take care of it sir,'" Fisher said, adding that the lieutenant walked back over to him and said, "Welcome."

Fisher stayed at Keesler 14 months to finish his training, but not without segregation. He explained how every day the communication trainees would march through town on the way to the training center. But Fisher would not walk with them.

"The lieutenant said, 'I am sorry, but due to the problems in town, you cannot march with the troops.'" Fisher explained. So every day he was driven over in a military car. "This was Mississippi. It was hot. So I didn't mind."

After finishing training, Fisher was sent to Dobbins Air Force Base in Marietta, Ga. This time by bus.

At every stop, Fisher explained, the driver would call out the town's name, and how long until their next departure.

"'Forty-five minutes' he would say, but I was worried he would try to leave me."

So at one stop Fisher got off, rushed to a grocery store, bought \$6 in food, hurried back, and took his spot at the back.

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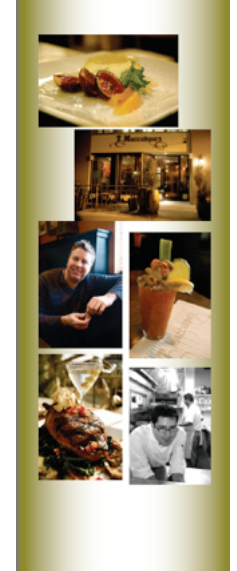
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LITTLE THEATRE

"I was tired of that Jim Crow. I was tired of going to the back. I was tired."

It would be a refusal to go to the back that would eventually lead Fisher to a meeting with Martin Luther King Jr.

Three months after being stationed at Dobbins Air Force Base, Fisher said he received special orders to go to Craig Air Force Base in Alabama.

Fisher's brother, Franklin, was also in the Air Force. And Franklin's wife, Sadie, had refused to go to the back of a bus in nearby Selma, Ala.

"The bus was full. They asked her to move to the back, but there were no seats in the back. She refused," he said. "So the bus driver stopped the bus, the side door came open, and she was thrown down the steps."

Sadie was also 5 months pregnant.

"We were afraid that she lost the baby," Fisher said, adding there were other threats at the time.

"The commander informed Franklin not to talk to anyone. No reporters. And if you did, you would suffer the consequences," Fisher said, and added that military police were posted outside of his brother's house and Sadie's hospital room. But those MPs didn't have much effect on King.

"I will never forget it. It was on a Wednesday. Oh I guess it was about 1 in the afternoon. Someone knocked on the (hospital room) door. And I didn't know that it was Rev. King.

"He introduced himself as Rev. King. The MPs said 'no you can't go in there.' He said, 'I am Rev. King, and they have something to tell me in private'," and King entered and shut the door with the MPs outside.

Fisher said his brother never told King directly what happened, but in an indirect way it was made clear.

"He told him in other words," he said, adding that King also figured out the situation with the gag order.

"The Rev. King said, 'I know you are military. I don't want you to say something today that you will be sorry about tomorrow. But if there is ever anything my staff or myself can do for you, anytime, if anything goes wrong and you feel like you are not being treated just, you give me a call.'"

Sadie did have her child, a girl named Gail, without any health concerns.

Five years later, Fisher would leave the South for good to be stationed at what was then a part civilian, part military airport in Walla Walla. He worked for the Air Force in Walla Walla for another 10 years, and retired with more than 23 medals, including a Purple Heart.

During his duty in Walla Walla, Fisher says 500 military personal were station here, but only about a dozen were African American.

"Here, it was nice. It wasn't great, but it was nice," Fisher said, noting that he and his friends would usually go to Pasco during the weekends, where there was a large African-American population.

"During the weekend if you didn't go to Pasco, you stayed on base," Fisher said. "You could go to town, but people would stare," he said, adding they don't stare anymore.

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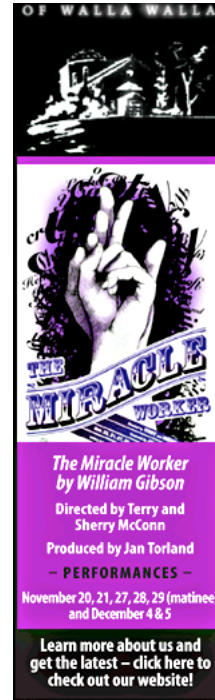
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