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## Interview with Earl Harris

Earl Harris

Maggie Ahearn

Anne Smetak

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Interview--  
"Living Together"  
African-American Community  
Earl Harris  
11/13/98  
Interview by: Maggie Ahearn and Anne Smetak

Anne:...November 13th, 1998. To with we just want to get some basic biographical information from you. Where are you from originally?

Mr. Harris: Originally I'm from a small place in Georgia, name of it's Tannel. Basically about ten thousand people, but you wouldn't believe it because it's so close and compact.

Anne: When did you move to the area?

Mr. Harris: I moved here...I first came here in 1980. I actually moved here in '87. 'Cause my ex-wife. And I liked it here. But at that time it was just partying. You know you're twenty-one twenty-three years old you're not really thinking so I'm going back and forth between here and Marion. Because I'm originally from Marion. I was born in Georgia but my family's in Marion. Basically I came in '87 and I've been here ever since.

Maggie: Do you enjoy living here?

Mr. Harris: Now, me, I can say to a certain degree I do. And I know that's totally different from what my wife said. But see I can't speak on her part I can only speak on mine. But me, I can say that I do, but that doesn't mean I like everything that goes on around here. But other than that I do.

Maggie: What is it about the area that you like?

Mr. Harris: Number one like she already said, to me, because I've seen so much wildness from where I'm originally from, and even from Marion to move to here. It's not the place I want to have my kids. Sure there's junk going on around here, but it's not as wide open and it's something that I can be closer to my kids. As far as them playing softball, or them playing basketball, and me being a big part of it, and not having to go so far just to... Let's say she was in Columbus, you have to do so much traveling just to get everything done in an evening. Whereas right here it's not that way. So I think, raising a family's my main thing and being able to enjoy life with them.

Anne: What was it like growing up in the South?

Mr. Harris: At that time, when I was younger, it was hard, but I didn't know it was hard. Because it was just a way of life for me. My grandparents, that's who raised me, we were poor. A lot of people look at me today, I'm forty-one years old, and basically from one to thirteen was

basically just black and poor. And we had to work. You know we had to work before we had to school, we had to work when we got out of school. I mean working around the house, not going out to get a job, but working around the house. We had a garden, we had to do that. It was rough in the sense that there were marches, there were protests, even though it was at the time I was young, but I still remember the marches. Stuff with Ralph Abernathy I don't know if you know him but he marched with King. All of this was because of the mistreatment that was going on there. I remember times before we even integrated. The school system was easier because we didn't have the best teachers, or the best, just whatever, and we didn't realize it until we did integrate. And then we started going to the school with white and black. Than things got a little harder, but that was because the money was being spent there. Now I see that, I didn't know that then. But now I see it twenty-odd years later. And you know having to protect yourself as far as...and I remember a time...it was never on the school bus. Because we got on the school bus with most of the blacks and you didn't have to sit anywhere. You could sit where you wanted to, but at that time the blacks were sitting in the back of the bus because that's where you wanted to sit. And because when we did integrate, at that time there were more blacks in school than there were whites. And I can remember a lot of time with bad-vibes and being called names, but because there were so few white people, they didn't say too much. It was rough but than again it was good because it showed me a lot when I moved here.

Maggie: You consider living here very different from the South?

Mr. Harris: Yes, very different. Where I'm from down there every corner you've got...it integrated slowly where I'm from. You've got to understand where I'm from it's African-Americans, blacks what ever you want to call them from this corner to that corner. Whereas here you could probably go a whole day before you see anyone else black. And as far as job, working-wise, you've got people, down there in Georgia in the South right now you'll see most of the blacks are farming somebody else's land. And it's hot, and they're not making that much money. Whereas my family moved up here and most of them are doing okay now. But the fact that they left that to try to get something better in Marion and Columbus...but there is a difference.

Anne: I'm curious about the African-American community that you grew up with in the South and the change that you experienced coming here.

Mr. Harris: Now, my family's in Marion so they're basically in the South, but we're going to say Mt. Vernon, that's what we're talking about. It's between night and day. As far as when I first moved here and I used to go out to the clubs and just hang out with a few blacks here, I'd hang out with everybody is basically what it boils down to. But by being here I met quite a few blacks, and I had a problem with them. I had a problem with them because I'm not used to the language, the way they talk. And I listen to it, and the people that they associate with was...now I have no problem with it, I have a lot of white friends. I go watch football with them that's what we do. But I don't go out of my way to try to be in your face just because you are white. And that's what I see a lot of blacks here do. And black men I've seen especially do that. When I first moved here I couldn't understand the way they were talking, and down South you've got...a black person from here couldn't move down South in the community that I'm from. Because he's taken on, somewhat of your lifestyle, not taken it on, but to a degree he has because he's

been around it. Like Lorrie, my wife, my sister talked to her on the phone about a year ago, before she ever met her. And she knew I was married before to a white girl. And she asked me, my sister got on the phone and she said, 'Earl, is she white?', no she said, 'Earl, what color is she, is she white?'. I said no, it's like that. It's just that impression that I joke about with Lorrie a lot about the way she says words and things. Because my words are totally different from hers. Like I say, down, she'll say daiwn. Like you would probably say, I say doown she says daiwn. It's different. And that's what I mean. She gets along with my family because they're my family, but if she just went there it would be really hard for her to adapt to.

Maggie: Do you feel like there's any kind of a community here in the Knox County area?

Mr. Harris: No. They may, you've got three black churches here. You've got maybe ten people in all three of them. So you've got thirty people going to three churches. So they go to each other's functions, but they're still going with their own group of people. And basically in that group your still going to have loners in that groups and their going to go their own way too, so really that's going to spread it out even more. So how can you have a community as far as a black community in this community when none them really stay together at all anyway. Like Lorrie and Karen they're only here because they were raised here and her and I talk about it all the time. She do anyway, she brings it up about leaving and Columbus and Mansfield or Marion, and that's where I don't want to be. Because, there are bad people everywhere, but I was raised...Some blacks in this town are naive to other blacks out of this town. They get hurt, she can get hurt by not knowing how to accept what they may be doing, I don't know how to put that, what's the word I'm looking for...easy to manipulate, because she's going to put on this black face, when they've never been around blacks. And they try to go in the black world and it's like, whoa, it's a reality check. That's what you are, but that's really not what you are because you wasn't raised around them. You were raised here in Mt. Vernon and I've talked to her countless times, I asked her, 'Lorrie, who'd you take to the prom?'. She tell me her first date, the first guy she was in love with he was white, you know what I mean? That's not the wrong way to act. But what I'm saying is that's what she was used to. Whereas my experience was totally the opposite of hers, everything was opposite.

I don't know if you want to say any thing about work. I don't have no problem with work here. I believe, and I know they're going to look at your skin color, I know that. It's just like this place United Pre Gas (?) here in Mt. Vernon. They've never hired blacks out there, never. In 1990, I needed a job bad because I'd been laid off for a long time and someone told me they were hiring people. I had went there six or seven years prior and I didn't get hired. Three white guys got hired before me, but they had their interviews after me. I didn't think much of it at the time because I went and got another job someplace else. But this time I said, I went there and I said they're not going to turn me down this time. I had made up in my mind, regardless of color or anything you're not going to tell me I'm not going to get this job. And after I went through my interview they hired me, because of my persistence. Now, I don't think I would have had to be as persistent if I would have been a different color. This is just like that warehouse. There's only one, there've been two blacks out there that I know of, probably more. One was her brother, and he was up in management and another guy which is Moe Mosby (?). He's been there about twenty-odd years. That's the only one person. That thing's probably, about six, seven, eight-hundred people who work there. Cooper's basically about the same. It's not...and people do

apply for those jobs, they just don't get them. And another thing, in the workplace, I've had...even at that United Pre Gas when I went there and I had some pretty nice supervisors, they were nice, they were young guys, they were younger than I was. My work performance was good so we got along real good and we were able to talk after a period of time and they told me they had to change their whole way of talking when I got hired. The supervisor came to me, he was young, he was really a nice guy. He came and told me one day he said, 'Earl, I've got to apologize to you.', and I said, 'For what?'. And he said, 'When you first got hired here I actually had to change,' a few more of them he said the same thing to him, because naturally you know what they was saying before I started working there, their daily language. And I said, 'What are you talking about?'. And he told me it was the n-this the n-that, and I said ok, fine. I didn't have a problem because of the way he came and told me. Where I work now at LB Manufacturing it's, there's some, people out there, I don't even think they know they're prejudiced. That's the killing part, the work with you, they laugh in your face all day long, they'll give you money if you need it. You see, they will actually do that. But I remember one incident one of the guys that I talk to all the time, talk about his son playing football or basketball, talk to him all the time, daily laughing with him. And one day I walked in and he didn't know I was behind him and lo and behold he said that word he was talking to another guy. And that's where, the only way I could react to it, because it caught me off guard the way he said it, I just kept walking as though I didn't even hear it. But it sunk in, because it's something you really don't want to hear, especially while he's saying it. You only use that word when you're referring to one race, and that is black so...that goes on here now, that goes on everywhere. But it's worse when you're the only black, because I'm the only black worker there too except for the other one who's the plant manager. And I'm a different person but I notice the way you carry yourself, your self-esteem, I don't put myself as having limitations, but I know there is limitations as far as in the workplace.

And another thing about what Lorrie and Karen were talking about, my oldest daughter, she's sixteen, she's by my first wife, and then I've got another daughter that's ten. And they're darker, their mother's probably your skin tone. But they're more my skin tone and their hair's coarse, it's straight to a degree, but then again it's coarse because I have real coarse hair. But I remember when the oldest one was in the fifth grade and she was going over there at the West School. She had came home and she had homework to do and her little girlfriends at the time came home with her. They said the teacher made Tomica mad. I said, about what? They said she was yelling at Tomica and she was telling Tomica that she had to read this book. And I said, what book? And the girls said, well she didn't have to read it because we knew what was in the book. These girls were ten years old at the time. They were really good friends that had played softball with her the summer before so I knew them. And they knew, I guess they knew for some reason that it wasn't right. Because in that book it says something to the effect of, it was Old Yeller, in one section it had, the sheriff was talking to the cook, which was a black lady and saying, 'Ain't nothing better than that nigger-smelling cooking I can smell it from miles around'.

And my daughter didn't want to read that, but the teacher was saying it was okay to read that. This was in '92, so you take it from there. And we went to the school board about that, and I believe they took that book out. But then again they moved away and I don't know but there are a lot of things here in Mt. Vernon that people really don't see. And it's been fair to me to a degree, but only because I've pretty much made it that way. Work I'm just out there. And like Lorrie and them was saying, I don't see...I see the problem that they're talking about, but they're women and I'm a man. Whereas when I moved here it's like I moved in and all I'd seen was

women. That's the way I was at the time. That's the way I was and then I married someone, and hey, it was cool to me. I never experienced, like I said I was twenty years old at the time, then moving to Marion, 'cause Marion you've got a lot of diversity. You've got white, black, white, black, you name it, but you've also got a lot of blacks also. Whereas here you just...when I first came here it seemed black and white the way I've seen it I was shocked. I really was because I'd never seen so many mixed race in the same town, and especially in the same area. But I feel bad for black women in this town, I really do. Like Karen, I know as far as dating, I know a lot of black men here, and a lot of them are good ones and a lot of them are into alcohol and drugs. Whereas thank G-d I don't have that problem. I feel bad for her, and that's a good black woman in her later years in life and just going nowhere with no one to share nothing with. Because like Lorrie said you have to go out of town to find these men. That's ridiculous. But that's the way it is.

Anne: So do you think you'll stay around here?

Mr. Harris: Now see, that's a touchy subject, because she wants to move. But see my kids, they live in Newark, okay. And that's another different story. But they live in Newark and I live here. As far as I'm concerned, right now, I'm close to my kids. My thing is I want to stay as close as I can to them. So yes. And like I said, my job is here and the cost of living isn't too crazy, it's not too high, so hey. I will.

Maggie: Is there anything else we haven't talked about that you think you be important for us to know?

Mr. Harris: I don't know. I guess the fact that, like Lorrie and them said, ...Gary Lewis as far as really wanting to interact with kids around here and most of the kids to interact with are white. Not only kids, like my daughter was the only one to play softball. And there was one who played from '89 to '92, and then my youngest one this year played last year, and she's going to be playing again this year. I don't know...they don't...and maybe it's the older black men who can be influenced with some of the black kids don't get involved. They don't get involved with these kids and get these kids out there. Whereas I don't have a problem coaching then white kids. I don't have a problem coaching ten white kids and one black kid, which I have done for years. But it's...there are only two that I know of, me, like I said, Gary Lewis, he's a state highway patrol that really get out and get involved and that's the only way I can talk to a kid as far as getting him out on the softball field or on the basketball court. But nobody really gets involved, they don't. And I've seen that, I've asked Lorrie countless times, why don't any of these kids go out for sports in school? I don't understand them. The only thing, if there's mothers here I know there have to be some kids here. I mean where are they at when they go to school? You know you go out on the basketball court and football field, the only thing you see is white out there. And I know...even if you're bad go out there. But they don't even do that and I believe it's because nobody's really, right now, pushing them. And I believe that comes from home. And mine are out there so.. Nobody's really stepping forward to, I guess because, and like Lorrie said, we're all guilty of it I guess. But I guess I've got my thing out there and I'm doing my part, and I don't need to try to talk to nobody else, but maybe I should, but I really don't. And it's not that I don't have the time to, I just don't. But, and I know people may say these things behind my

back, you this, you that, but I don't really know. I don't really think so. Because I met a lot of white people out here and even the justice system up here. I know a lot of people like the sheriff, the judge, I coached her daughter this summer in ball and got to know them real good. Now that's not saying how it is, am I going to be invited to dinner next week. But the fact is they're getting to know me as a person. As for her to trust me with her daughters four days a week two and a half hours a day, and then drive across country together when they make the all-star team that's saying...I think a person should just get out there and show what they're about. And it don't mean, it could be intellectual or it could just be just getting out there that you can still make a difference in what ever you're doing. And that's what's wrong. So that's it.

Maggie: Thank you so much for doing this...