

My Haircut for Civil Rights

By William J. “Bill” Meers, meersworld@sbcglobal.net

I was raised in La Grange, Kentucky, a town 27 miles northeast of Louisville that had a population of 2,500 in the 1950s. My father owned a hardware store, Jerry’s Corner Store, at First and Main Streets—the town’s main intersection. I graduated from all-white Oldham County High School in 1960.



In those years, public schools and other community institutions were segregated. There was a separate elementary school for black children and black high school students were bused to Lincoln Institute in adjoining Shelby County. The county courthouse still had black and white restrooms and drinking fountains.

In the early ‘60s while a student at Transylvania College in Lexington, Kentucky, I became involved in the civil rights movement. I attended civil rights meetings and rallies at Negro churches in Lexington where national civil rights leaders, such as James Farmer and Ralph Abernathy, spoke. I participated with members of the Lexington Chapter of the Congress on Racial Equality in tests of the Phoenix Hotel’s policy of not serving Negroes in its restaurant. I helped organize Transylvania students for the March on Frankfort led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in March 1964 in support of legislation outlawing racial discrimination in public accommodations in Kentucky.

After graduation from Transylvania, I joined the Peace Corps for a teacher project in the Somali Republic. But half way through training, the Peace Corps administrators informed me that they didn’t think I was strong enough to serve in the Peace Corps.

Now eligible for the draft, I joined the Navy, completed Officer Candidate School, and was assigned to a troop transport in Little Creek, Virginia.

I came home to La Grange on leave from the Navy in 1966 to visit my parents and sister and brother. Before departing for a new duty station in Boston, I wanted to get my hair cut and went to the barbershop in the next block on Main Street. I was wearing my Navy uniform as my father wanted to show the people downtown how proud he was of me.

I don’t remember waiting very long in the barber shop before a barber I knew from previous visits signaled me to his free chair. I barely had time to get comfortable in the chair when he asked, “I hear you are a member of the NAACP?”

While I had been a NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) youth member in 1961 as a college freshman, I wasn’t a member at that time as I hadn’t kept up my membership after graduation.

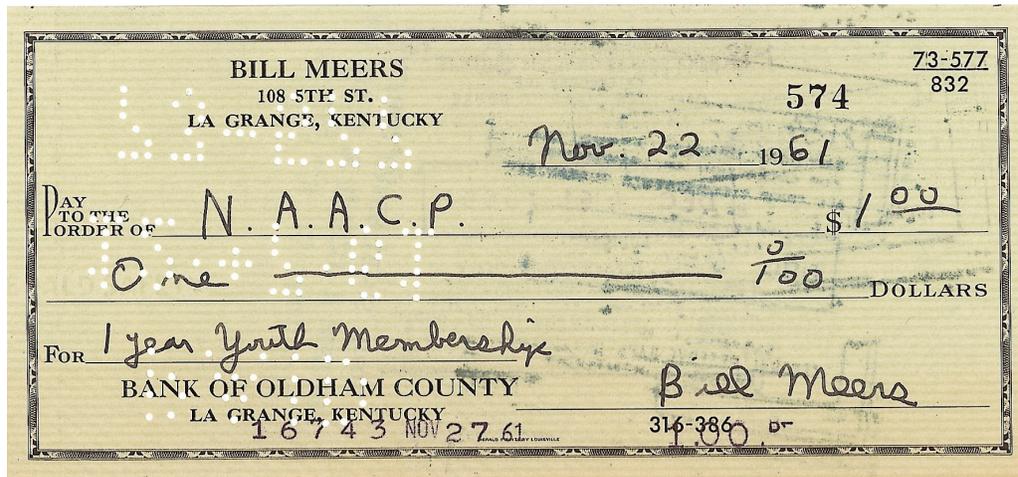
He may have learned about my NAACP membership from a postal clerk who had handled the NAACP’s *Crisis* magazine that came to our post office box each month. Except for one significant event, all my civil rights activities had been in Lexington. I had been responsible for inviting the black Baptist and black Methodist churches to participate in La Grange’s community Easter sunrise service for the first time several years earlier. But I don’t think many people knew about my role in that event or would have associated it with the NAACP.

“No, I am not a member,” I said, “but I support their goals for racial equality.”

He wasn't satisfied with my indirect answer. I could tell immediately from his tight face in the long, wide mirror over the row of chairs across from us that his agenda was not hair, but politics. He pressed on, "Have you been in a civil rights demonstration?"

This time I knew he had me, that I would have to answer affirmatively. "Yes, I marched..." I began, intending to tell him about the March on Frankfort.

He didn't let me finish my response. He now had the confirmation he had been waiting for. He yelled at me, "Get the hell out of this chair and go to 'niggertown'* and get your hair cut!"



I got my hat and left the shop at a normal pace. But I didn't look back. When I returned to the hardware store, I must have told my father that I had changed my mind about the haircut. I didn't tell him what had really happened.

The shock of the rejection was quickly replaced by some relief as I reflected on the experience and realized that I had passed an important test-- that I had not denied my commitment to civil rights. I felt no anger, but the barber's hate-filled looks and words weighed on me. I was trying to think of an appropriate response.

Several months later after I had arrived in Boston for my new Navy assignment, I went to Roxbury, a traditional black neighborhood, to get my hair cut in a black barbershop. When I took my seat in the chair, the black barber proudly told me that Muhammad Ali had had his hair cut there -- and that I was sitting in the very same chair!



Unlike the experience in my hometown, this time I left the barbershop with a feeling of fulfillment. I was pleased that I had taken those words of hate and turned them into an experience that made me stronger and more credible in my pursuit of racial justice.

And I was excited about my lucky coincidence to sit in the same barber chair as Muhammad Ali. We were both born in Louisville in January 1942, and, for quite a few years now, I have been telling my friends that we are "twin brothers." (Muhammad Ali is actually two weeks older; he was born on the 17th, and I was born on the 31st.)

**I intentionally used the barber's actual derogatory term rather than a less offensive, representative term, such as "n-town" which might not be understood by some readers.*

P.S. I attended some sessions at the NAACP's national conference in Boston in 1967 and rejoined the NAACP as a regular member for several years in the early '70s. I continue to support the NAACP's important work for racial justice and equality and joined the Dayton, Ohio NAACP branch in April 2008.