

Highlights of the Civil Rights Activities of Reverend Hawthorne Konrad Matthews

Reverend H.K. Matthews stated in a personal interview (Broadview, 1978) that his involvement in local civil rights activities was to “Fight all racial injustices that shackle the hearts, bodies, and souls of people, especially the black and the poor, in Escambia County and the nation”.

Matthews’ opinion is that citizens have the right, indeed obligation, to participate in political dissent when established norms and social institutions are unjust. Matthews viewed the actions of law enforcement officials as unjust. He, along with hundreds of others, marched for months to bring attention to their misuse and abuse of authority. Though his protests eventually landed him inside the very system he was targeting, his actions also led to the firing of one officer and the indictment of another. As a social “irritant”, Matthews was extremely effective (Wiley, 2006).

What would be a fitting final word about this man? Matthews unwittingly Summarizes his own accomplishments. While at a ceremony when a 2.5 acre Park was named for him, Matthews (“Park is Named for Reverend H. K. Matthews,” stated (2006 May/June), “Finally, I am somebody To name a park after me is overwhelming.” That Matthews would utter these words 45 years after he took the helm of leadership in the Civil Rights struggle in Pensacola, seem more telling than any other words written about him. History Makers has interviewed him as one of a select few. He has had a book written about him. He has received numerous honors, both locally and nationally. Yet, the benchmark he uses to mark his success is this small park named in his honor in the city where his struggle for social justice began (Wiley, 2006).

When Matthews speaks of humanity being clothed in a single garment of destiny, his voice seems to echo with unusual wisdom. His mind seems transfixed on another place and time. Perhaps Matthews, like Dr. King (Carson, 1987), is profoundly aware of the qualities he shares with all people. Perhaps this sense of shared humanity and common destiny, along with the seeming other-worldliness of his voice, is what inculcated in others to share his vision and passion for justice. By giving voice to African Americans’ dreams and visions, he helped transform the environment of Blacks in Pensacola and northwest Florida.

Activities Reverend Matthews participated in his commitment to social justice.

- Co-led the sit-ins at lunch counters in downtown Pensacola in 1961. These actions eventually led to the integration of lunch counters in Pensacola, FL
- Led the successful effort to desegregate bowling alleys in Pensacola, FL
- Marched in the historic civil rights march in Alabama led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. from Selma to Montgomery in 1965
- Worked with other local activists to desegregate the Florida Theater
- Helped led the successful effort to get blacks hired at Southern Bell Telephone company
- Jailed 35 times for his participation in civil rights activities
- Was awarded the purple heart for his military service in Korea during the Korean conflict
- Led a successful selective buying campaign against Smith's Bakery which eventually led to the hiring and upgrading of black employees
- Led a successful drive to get blacks hired at Nolan's grocery by picketing the store.
- Led the successful fight to get blacks hired in meaningful positions in downtown Pensacola by conducting selective buying campaigns against those stores that refused to hire blacks.
- Led students at Escambia High School in walkouts to protest the use of Confederate symbols at the school. These symbols included playing of the song "Dixie" and the display of the "Rebel" mascot.
- Led a successful drive to get black history week initiated in Escambia County by leading black students at Pensacola High School in a protest.
- Led the successful effort to get blacks hired in positions other than housekeeping and cooking at Sacred Heart Hospital.
- Along with other black leaders, established "Freedom Schools" in homes and churches to ensure that black students continued to have access to learning during the time that students boycotted local public schools.

- Was named the number one political prisoner in America in 1978 by the National Southern Christian Leadership conference after he was sentenced to five years in prison for his participation in a civil right demonstration in Pensacola in 1975.
- Led weeks of local protests in Escambia County following the killing of Wendell Blackwell, a black, man, by a sheriff's deputy following a speeding stop in the winter of 1974.
- Formed the Pensacola NAACP Youth Council

Poetic transcription of Reverend Matthews' words

They went to great lengths
 To silence me
 Everybody does not have the stamina
 To fight racism

To stand up under the pressure
 Like an agitator
 Spun around and around
 Slung the dirt out of the system

It was my time
 I think I had the vision
 I listened, I never went back
 I never forgot

The flagrant, obvious, conspicuous racism
 I shall never forget
 I was in the line of fire
 I got hurt a bit

I guess I was scared
 Feelings of confusion and utter disgust
 Recognized as nothing
 A strong faith to press forward

Sometimes Black causes are not Black causes
 We are wrapped in this single garment of destiny
 Coming together, moving forward
 That was done by providence
 It was my time