

Black Life at Brown:

Then and Now

Submitted by:
Rodrick D. Echols
For UC 110
K Sacks & P Hocking
12/11/01

In the late 1960s, the University made a commitment to affect the general black populace in the next freshman class; this translated into 100 more blacks. How did students react on campus? What cross-cutting cleavages in the Brown community became apparent as a result of this sweeping institutional decision? Contextually, the country was immersed in a debate regarding the Vietnam War, Dr. King was dead, and JFK, “the Yankee from up north,” had been assassinated. In sum, the black community’s emerging middle and entrepreneurial class was born out of a period of great uncertainty.

Was the nation headed for national civil war between the races? If so, why or how was it avoided? One could say that as even blacks were being rescued by affirmative action and equal opportunity legislation, the role of higher education was simultaneously changing. Prep schools were visiting the no-longer-segregated South and recruiting the most distinguished students of color for vigorous study. This select group of students went on to attend the most elite institutions in the country, including Brown, over the 1960s and the 1970s. Thus, for the first time in history, blacks were gaining entrance into the established power structures (industry, media, politics, bureaucracy, etc). With this newfound breath of social mobility, opportunities for the advancement (or degradation) of the black image, as well as the community, abounded.

I decided to interview Mr. Harold Bailey ‘70, a “transition black,” about his Brown experience, in the context of an uncertain, nervous United States. Themes focused on the following: Background, First Knowledge of Brown, Freshman Year, Friends and Support Structures, Image and Personal Construction, and Life After Brown. My intent was to gain insight into how Mr. Bailey how he perceived the country during the late 1960s, the black man’s new (economic) role in a “white man’s world,” and

Brown's image during this time of grave uncertainty. A summary of the questions I asked is below:

Theme 1. Background

Tell me about yourself, your background.
Where did you grow up? Family history?
Who was the most influential person in your life?
Do you have a favorite quote?

Theme 2. First Knowledge of Brown

How did you first hear of Brown?
Why did you apply? Where else did you apply?

Theme 3. Freshman Year

Describe it academically, socially, physically. How was the adjustment process?
Specify your family (home) connection, value system, or lack thereof.

Theme 4. Friends and Support Structures

From whom did you acquire support?
Who would you say was a part of your "extended family?"

Theme 5. Image and Personal Construction

How did Brown's both spoken and unspoken truths affect your view of yourself?
Can you describe any unusual situations, or startling moments, you found yourself in?

Theme 6. After Brown

How has your Brown experience affected your view of higher education?
Society?
Did Brown change your fundamental perspectives in any shape, form, or fashion?

The Interview (Relevant Portions)

Harold Bailey '70 (HB)

Rodrick Echols '03 (RE)

RE: "Tell me about yourself."

HB: "Well, I grew up in Knoxville. I went to, uh, uh, I was born in 1948. So, I went to school there. Uh, obviously, it was segregated. I always loved reading, and I loved school. I did pretty well there. And the better I did, the more I wanted to do. So, I, uh, uh, it was around the age of 14, when I was in the ninth grade. There were kind of two things that happened. One, prep schools came around looking for kids. Exeter sent someone down to Knoxville. I had never heard of anything like a prep school, until they came to my school."

RE: "When did you attend Exeter?"

HB: "The summer after my freshman year. I decided I could have the best of both worlds by staying at home during the academic year. I went to Tilton High for boys after receiving great financial support from the Headmaster during the summer before my junior year. So, I spent my last two years of high school at a prep school, namely Tilton."

RE: "Tell me about your pre-prep school years and the abrupt change in scenery at Tilton."

HB: "I have always admired, uh, teachers, who have an acute interest in developing bright young people for tomorrow. So the best thing about attending a segregated school was that the teachers were all about learning and taught the value of education. They were all black, but I didn't know there were teachers better than them. When resources were not available, they did not stop and kept on rearing me into both an intellectual and friend. So, for me, my public school experience wasn't that bad

RE: "How was the home experience during the early years?"

HB: "At home, the same concepts were emphasized. A valued education, proper manners, undying tenacity. All those things."

RE: "So, your parents constantly encouraged you intellectually."

HB: "Yes, they did. They would always provide positive feedback and praise for my intellectual achievements. My mother would always say that no matter what I learned, they could never take it away from me."

RE: "Tell me about the school integration experience."

HB: “I don’t want to concentrate too long on it, but I will say that I remember days when I lived in absolute horror. I don’t miss them.”

RE: “How were you treated?”

HB: “Some days, I would be thrown against the lockers and laughed at. Keep in mind this was a school with eight blacks out of 1500 whites. This was no cup of tea, for me, a smart black kid in grave danger every minute. The hostility was visible.”

RE: “Do you have a personal account, before we delve into questions related to Brown?”

HB: “The day for Jack Kennedy’s assassination...things had gotten so bad. We all took the bus to downtown Knoxville and then switched to go to our respective, segregated neighborhoods. The name was ridiculous. Nigger, boy, etc. So, on that day, we got tired and decided to something about it. We got off the bus downtown and there was an altercation. Blacks from the city buses were screaming at whites, which were also screaming. It was a literal face-off between hundreds of kids. The next day, we learned that some white students from across town were bringing guns. Someone was going to get killed. However, the asst. principal, a big and husky guy, brought into his office and said to the rowdy white students, ‘if anyone gets hurt today, I will not only suspend you, I will arrest you as well.’ He stood at the door wearing switches as we got on the buses to go home. This happened the same day as JFK’s death. Rodrick, the last thing I heard before leaving the school grounds is, ‘the leader’s dead.’ The country loved him.”

RE: “Before going to Exeter, what was your understanding of it?”

HB: “I had absolutely no understanding. All I knew was this prep school wanted me. The nice thing about the summer was coed. I did not know what to expect. Sure, I had rumors about type schools, but I was nevertheless careful. I loved that summer experience. This was before school integration. This was my first bout of integrated education with whites. My father before dropping me off said, ‘be a good soldier.’ I was on my own.”

RE: “How did you get through it?”

HB: “I tried for twenty minutes, and then thought, man, this is ridiculous! I met a few people guys in the hallway and, before I knew it, I had a wonderful time at Exeter. I even danced with the white girls! At home, I could have been lynched over that stuff. Academically, I was shocked. Knocked on my face! No longer was I getting automatic A’s. I had to really read, to really study, to survive. And I did.”

RE: “How did Brown be the final pick for you?”

HB: “I was in my Tennessee History class at Tilton. And everybody had a chance to say where he or she was going. I said, ‘Yale,’ because Yale was happenin’ at the time. They

were admitting blacks in record numbers. Yale and Harvard were all knew about. My choices were Brown, Yale, Cornell, Hamilton, Howard, and others. I chose Brown because I fell in love on the visit; I liked the way it looked. My roommate at Tilton was from Providence. Sure, Yale was getting huge press for its insistence on admitting a relatively large number of black freshman, but I did not want to be a statistic on a sheet of paper. Brown was the right fit.”

RE: “Tell me about your freshman year at Brown.”

HB: “Had I used the same discipline of learning at Brown that I used at Tilton, things would have been a whole lot different. I mean, I had all this freedom. You could stay out. Even though I felt better prepared than most kids, I did not exercise it in my studies. In short, I met too many folks my freshman year and not enough books. There were seven black men in my class, so I was to a situation similar to high school in Knoxville. Was it uncomfortable? Yes, but I didn’t just how uncomfortable it was at the time. I could have never gone home. I had to apply myself. My GPA was 2.555, mainly C’s, but things progressed nicely after the freshman year.

RE: “So without the prep school, you could not survived the introduction to Brown.”

HB: “Oh, yes! That is very true. I probably would have packed up and gone home. Interestingly enough, I dated a white girl for the first time my freshman year. We liked each other, but her parents didn’t. Know what I mean?”

RE: “Painfully, yes.”

HB: “That was interesting. The racial component broke things up. She was from California, and her parents deemed it a disgrace to the family. It was not the academics. After my freshman year, we broke up and got back together. So, then I met Bernestine, the pride of my life today.”

RE: “Great. Before we talk about the Pembroke’s, tell me about the social context in which your Brown experience took place.”

HB: “Well, we have the Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam War, and it was unbelievable. The New Curriculum was being formed. All of a sudden, Brown, this sleepy, little ‘Playboy’ kind of place had come alive. Kids were coming to Brown because they wanted to, not because it was the alternative to Harvard and Yale. These were exceptionally bright folks. Radical organizations were formed rapidly and students were vocal on any number of issues, as they are still today, but I’m sure in different ways.”

RE: “Did your level of social awareness increase at Brown?”

HB: “It was the same throughout, especially due to the Civil Rights Movement. I felt my purpose to debunk the myths about ‘us’ to a world that knew no better. What I got an extra dose of was the politics around Vietnam. Once I learned what was *really* happening

over with the exploitation of blacks, I vehemently spoke out against it. Dr. King did not muddy the waters with his opposition to the war. He was calling our attention to horrible truths. I did do much around the New Curriculum. But I did do WBRU, the radio station.”

RE: “Tell me about your friends and/or support structures throughout your Brown experience.”

HB: “I was very close with my freshman friends in what is now Keeney Quad. We would have long conversations at night and provocative exchanges. So, the way you moved forward at that time was that you’d join a fraternity. I pledged Phi Si, though my friend, Ernie, was not accepted. I broke the color line; Ernie fell through academically. I had the Jackie Robinson mentality-always trying to accomplish the firsts.”

RE: “OK. During your second and third years, were you more concentrated on your academics, your community service, activism, something else?”

HB: “Academics were the key, after my first semester. I majored in applied math and philosophy. I was one of those midnight computer nuts, trying to get a computer and print codes before the power went down. There were Pembrokers there, too. We got started when everyone was going to sleep. But, boy, did we learn! It was brilliant stuff.”

RE: “Describe your experience with the Pembrokers, namely your wife, and your feelings about the university’s policies on admissions and financial aid.”

HB: “I met Bernestine in my sophomore year. She was a senior. We met at an off-campus party. She was beautiful. Ernie and I went over to the party. I danced with her, and we hit it off. Oh, she just walked into the room, so I can’t say too much. I loved her, Rodrick. She was a fine black woman, majoring in economics. My pride and joy!”

RE: “And your thoughts on campus activism at the time?”

HB: “The Curriculum was the centerpiece during my time on campus. There was one piece-the walkout. This happened the year after Bernestine graduated. I was one of the participants, during my junior year. The Pembrokers wanted us to help them in getting more black women; we joined them in the fight. So, we walked out-the afro-am society was just getting off the ground. We got together at the Ratty and planned the walkout. It was huge. I participated. Scholarships were in jeopardy and people had upset parents. It was a risky situation. I had to be active with the black community, even though I had a few white blacks.”

RE: “I see.”

HB: “To be honest with you, I will never be totally comfortable around whites. Even today. It ain’t-I know what people are capable of doing. Brown was not home, it was school. By not having any representation of us, we were told that we did not matter.

This is what we were taught by Brown's policies. The guys in my fraternity were absolutely livid about the promise to get 100 more blacks in the incoming class. They felt this would lower the standards of the university; this was the 'white' attitude. The assumption was that not enough bright black kids existed, but I knew this was false. I left twelve of them at home when I left for Brown. On every other issue, I was a cool, black guy. Harmless. Know what I mean? Parents would show up and assume that I agreed with them. This really made me feel uncomfortable."

RE: "By the arrival of your senior year, what did you begin to view as your role in the American society?"

HB: "Well, I had a job already with IBM. They hired me immediately out of Brown. So, economically, I was set, due to my race and the need for more of us in business. However, socially, I felt the country was headed for a 'racial civil war.'"

RE: "Really?"

HB: "We had Nixon. Nixon led a massive, right wing crackdown on black radical voices, including the Panthers. We could see how, in city-after-city, they would basically kill off any dissidents. Blacks were being silenced all around the country. I thought we were headed for war."

RE: "So, we know that war did not happen. What would you attribute that to?"

HB: "I have been considering this question for a long time. So many blacks were entering corporations, for the first time, in waves. Salaries were going up, because of oversight by the Equal Opportunity Commission. A lot of us got make-up checks. We were gaining valuable powers economically, while at the same time losing our vocal leaders in a political sense."

RE: "What became the challenge to this new entrepreneurial class of blacks?"

HB: "Change IBM from the inside, as a part of IBM. We had a lot of pressure on us. There was a shifting in ideology. We still wore the Afros and other pieces clothing from the Motherland. We were there to debunk the system."

RE: "So, one could say that civil war was avoided since blacks and whites alike were unsure of the proper rules of engagement, in a peaceful or at least, humanitarian, sense?"

HB: "That's well put. It was clear that repression was not the answer anymore. We not received a pretext for one to say, 'arrest all of the blacks in corporations.' Civil war was avoided. Thank God it did not. I think Nixon was too overwhelmed with Vietnam."

RE: "So, what is left for blacks to do today, with a powerful section of elites and persons in positions of power?"

HB: “The door of opportunity is about to close with fight against affirmative action. Understand that a lot of people in America are black with power. We exist. We must bring our resources together and mobilize them. Whites are now convinced that they are ‘playing by the rules.’ We have to keep our eyes on people and use our abilities for improved revolution-amalgamate the institutions of power at our disposal.”

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to interview Mr. Bailey, for two distinct reasons. First, much of his past coincides with my own. We both attended a public school in TN, traveled north for college preparatory school, and ended up at Brown for the very best in undergraduate education in America. I was struck, in particular, by his resolve to respect and become familiar with different peoples from different backgrounds. Yes, he was black and part of a movement for civil rights, but Mr. Bailey also saw himself as a human.

Indeed, there is much parity between Mr. Bailey's life in the late 1960s and my experiences to date. It appears that a middle and entrepreneurial class of blacks continues to emerge in the country. Mr. Bailey is correct in asserting that a decrease in the number of black applicants to Brown can be attributed to a lack of understanding among black youth about this influential class. He expressed his amazement with the talent of today's youth; in his words: "Our kids are twice as good. They can go six miles extra." Black youth need to be encouraged that they hold the key to preservation and enhancement of black power in America. The 1960s were just the beginning of black ascension to the forefront of American economics and politics. Organizations, like the Inman Page Black Alumni Association, can aid in this necessary process. Then, and only then, can we expect more black applicants to Old Brunonia.