First Interview for Harold Thomas in Three Parts
August 19, 2019
POAG Conference at Marriott Riverfront, Savannah
Interviewers: James C. Wright and Dr. Michael Van Wagenen
Transcription: James C. Wright

Part One

00:01 Introduction to date, place, and persons.

00:20 Harold started his career November 16th, 1957, for the city of Atlanta. In 1975 he transferred to the newly formed Fulton County Police Department. He stayed there until his retirement after 35 years of service in 1995.

01:02 Harold grew up on a farm in rural Georgia. He helped his parents on the dairy farm until he was 16, when he left for Atlanta. [see Part Two, 01:24]

01:55 He had two aspirations at that time: pharmacist or law enforcement. With no means of becoming a pharmacist, he decided to enter law enforcement.

02:32 Harold has had numerous cases that have humbled him over his career. In his first three months as a patrolman, he caught “Cason Buck,” one of the most notorious escape artists in the country, in downtown Atlanta. Buck was wanted by the FBI.

04:10 Harold’s most memorable case was apprehending “Lunas Ray Cargone” and handing him over to the FBI. His wife saved the newspaper clippings. He had only been a patrolman for 3-4 months at the time.

05:25 Harold was interested in climbing the vocational ladder as long as it benefitted him. He obtained a law degree and began to receive promotions. He moved up to chief at one point.

06:35 He was one of the selected officers to oversee the racial integration of the school systems. He was specifically assigned to Brown High School in Atlanta.

07:10 Kelvin Craig of the Ku Klux Klan lived in a few blocks of the school, but gave no trouble. The faculty would bring Harold snacks as he guarded the school.

08:09 After 2-3 years on the force, he transferred to traffic duty. Atlanta was and is one of the largest provinces in Georgia.

08:43 Harold was briefly Chief of Fulton County, but retired as Assistant Chief. He left as Fulton County’s Chief to an adjoining county in 1976 that offered him the opportunity to start a new police department. He used a leave of absence for that job and returned to Fulton County as Assistant Chief.
After his retirement he went to Alpharetta to assist as a police captain. He was awarded a service commendation in February 1995.

Before he left Atlanta, a synagogue on Peachtree road was bombed.

The biggest problems he faced in his career were moonshiners and gambling. Harold was promoted to Sergeant in January 1969.

Atlanta had a separate black police department. Harold was friends with many of those officers. The separate departments did not have tension, but gave referrals to one another. Neither department had many female officers. Two female officers that Harold remembers worked in juvenile justice.

In 1957 officers worked six days per week for little pay, but jobs were scarce. Patrolmen made $288 per month before deductions. After a few years the city switched to 5 and half work day-weeks, requiring officers to work six days one week and five days the following week. Eventually the work week descended to five day-weeks and pay gradually rose.

Atlanta has had good and bad mayors. Some were better than others.

One of the changes Harold remembers presenting difficulty to police was the Miranda Act. He believes the Act dropped a load of responsibility onto officers when they were not prepared to accept it. It caused departments to recreate their training programs.

Harold had been working as a policeman for two years before the agency sent him to the six-week training program. He felt that the experience he gained from veteran partners was more helpful than the training. Regardless, Harold was the top recruit among the 27 students in his class.

Solving crimes in the 50-60’s was challenging, but Harold claims that legalities today hinder investigations. Accused people having rights to lawyers greatly slows the justice process. In Harold’s time, due process was “simpler.”

An example is juvenile cases. In Harold’s time, as long as a kid did not do anything too flagrant they would turn the child back over to their parents. For many of those children they dreaded facing their parents, they rather be charged. “Of course,” recalls Harold, “we had better support in those days.”

Harold witnessed violence over the Civil Rights movement, but much of it came from outside Atlanta. He remembers a writer that was instigating local trouble, but once he left town the peace was restored.

In the 1950’s police motorcycles did not have radios. There were two-man and one-man patrol cars with one-man cars reserved for traffic duty. After Harold left
traffic duty he turned his one-man patrol car in for the motorcycle division. Harold rode the police motorcycle from 1959 to October 1972 as a Sergeant and Lieutenant. When he made Captain in 1972 he was ordered to relinquish his motorcycle.

24:42 As a Lieutenant, Harold had over 65 motorcycles in his squad spread over the county. They rode Harleys. This was prior to the creation of SWAT teams, so the motorcycle division was considered the elite police unit. They were given the roughest areas and groups of the city to patrol, including the “Outlaws” motorcycle gang.

25:30 Harold was called into the Chief’s office for assignment as a motorcycle squad leader, with the promotion from Sergeant to Lieutenant. The motorcycle squad was responsible for patrolling athletic events and parades as well.

27:12 The police were familiar with most of the KKK members around their vicinity. Kelvin Craig was a prominent member, but never gave the police problems. He would talk with Harold and encourage him to enforce the law, no matter what the law is. This was following the Brown vs Board of Education Supreme Court case.

29:27 Harold sometimes considered quitting the force, but claims it was “political.”

29:43 He does not consider himself a racist and recounts several black friends on his family’s dairy farm growing up. He states that everyone, black and white, worked on the farm.

31:25 During the Vietnam War, outsiders entered Atlanta with various different flags to protest and support the war. However, the crowds never got violent or chaotic and respected police authority. He states that people today disrespect police, especially by throwing water on them.

32:27 Race relations in Atlanta were not perfect, but Harold stayed in touch with every mayor of Atlanta. He particularly liked Andrew Young. Harold does not consider himself a racist, but felt he had been the target and victim of reverse-racial discrimination. This is the “political” influence he referred to [see 29:27].

Part Two

00:20 Harold felt that many of the racial changes in his department were not fair and he considered quitting, but he decided to ride it out. He believed that only people who were qualified with education should have been promoted.

01:24 Harold graduated from Comer High School and married a girl from his home of Madison County. They were married 56 and half years before she passed away. They had two daughters together.
03:50 He had two grandchildren that thought about getting into law enforcement, but
Harold had grown nervous of how officers have become targets. He is proud they
want to become officers, but feels this is a bad time to be in law enforcement.

04:37 Harold is 85 years old and battling congestive heart failure.

05:22 He participated in security training at the 1996 Olympics. He was sent to
Barcelona to study Spanish law enforcement tactics. They trained with shotguns
and machine guns. The Spanish National Police were nice to Harold’s unit.

08:00 He was not involved in the investigation of the Centennial Park bombing, but
was private security. He felt the media and feds made a mistake in accusing
Richard Jewell. Their intelligence information was inaccurate.

08:45 Harold was hired by a retired Secret Service agent for private security at the
Olympics. He was assigned to escort executives from Cox Enterprises to their
private stadium suite.

10:25 The first stadium built in Atlanta was the baseball stadium about 5-6 miles from
the capitol. It was later demolished and rebuilt. Piedmont Hospital was also
demolished to facilitate athletic construction. Harold’s experience was catching a
lot of thieves breaking into cars while he was a Sergeant. He also had a friend
killed by robbers near that location.

12:44 City officials later built another baseball stadium in Cobb County.

14:03 Harold enjoyed nearly the entirety of his career, and he is proud of all of it.
However, he thinks law enforcement needs additional public support for law
enforcement to thrive. Police abuse and endurance of being targets needs to stop.

15:39 He refers to the New York City mayor who is requesting his officers endure
having water thrown on them. The Mayor [Bill de Blasio] announced his intention
to run for president, but Harold says if he can’t protect the law enforcers of his
own state he would be poor at helping other states.

17:00 More social change needs to come to law enforcement. Harold recalls when
criminals went through a phase of murdering witnesses. People need to “wise up.”

Part Three

00:01 Harold came to know about the POAG and POAB in 1976.

00:44 He was elected First Vice President in 1979 (served 1980) and President in 1980
(served 1981).
He think the POAG was created around 1950 and well known by senators, governors, and politicians.

The disadvantage of the POAG was that it had difficulty getting information to field officers.

Harold learned about the POAG while working with a senior officer.

During that time the POAG required a medical approval for membership and had dues of $7 per month.

When he was ready to get more involved and run for president, he solicited support from law enforcement officials of surrounding counties.

His goal was to keep membership at 12-15,000. He also served on the pension board for 8-9 years.

End of interview.