

June 4, 1984

Manuel Briscoe: On Call for 34 Years

June first marked a new milestone in the life of Manuel Briscoe; for the first time in 34 years and two months he was free from the responsibility of serving as maintenance supervisor for the town of Mars Hill. In announcing his retirement to the Board of Alderman he recalled that when he came to work for the town, he and one policeman were the only employees; Major Ralph Lee "worked out of his home," and the aldermen were Bruce Murray, Charles Bruce, and Dr. Locke Robinson. "The town has really progressed," he said, mentioning a police force of five, six vehicles, a town manager, and a sanitation supervisor.

A dignified, well-dressed man, Briscoe greets everyone as "Mr." or "Mrs.," and he chooses words with care to offend no one. "I was proud," he says, not of his own accomplishments but of those of the town in almost tripling water service by installing meters in 1954, by constructing a five-million-gallon reservoir lake on Upper Laurel, by adding lines and valves, and by purchasing a jeep. The hardest part of his job resulted from his dedication to it: enduring storms and zero-degree weather to repair a main and restore water service.

Accepting a job with the town was another milestone in Briscoe's life, for he had been contemplating a move North, perhaps to Cincinnati, to find work. In 1943 he married Frances, a lady as well-groomed and graciously dignified as her husband. For awhile they lived in Swannanoa, where he had a retail milk route, but church and community prompted them to return to Mars Hill. Employment for her by the college and for him by the town enabled them to remain there. Two of their three children, however, Philip Manuel and Thelma, live in Chicago. Donna is a junior at Mars Hill College, majoring in fashion design.

As the third generation of his family to live in Madison County, Briscoe remembers his father Gilbert as "a hard-working farmer, dedicated to his church, school, and community." One of 15 children, including one set of triplets and one of twins, Manuel helped his father in his work as sharecropper on four or five different farms. It was in taking grain to the mill at Forks of Ivy that Manuel first became aware of a white community existing apart from the blacks, who at that time were scattered in various parts of the county. Another milestone in his life, therefore, was the formation of a black community centered in Mt. Olive Baptist Church. In 1937 tracts of land on Long Ridge became available, and Manuel's father was one of many blacks to purchase land for the first time and to construct houses. Although Gilbert lived only four more years, he left his family with the security of a home and land.

To his son he left the example of leadership which Manuel has followed ever since. Two roles in particular Manuel will continue into retirement, along with his avocations of fishing and deer-hunting: mediator between the black and white communities and leader in Mt. Olive Church.

Of the former, Briscoe admits that "at times you take the blues, when someone discredits what you stand for and do with the best intentions." Personally, he knows the pain of paying the fare and then having to push his way through a crowded bus to the rear, "where you belong," of having to "stop at a store for Nabs because no restaurant would let us in," of purchasing gas from a station that barred him from the restroom.

Nevertheless, he emphasizes the positive in race relations, claiming, "I can see a change in people's attitudes, blacks AND whites." It took the deaths of three black children from typhoid fever before an agreement could be reached whereby the blacks furnished the labor and the whites the lines to take water to the black Long Ridge community. The integration of the schools, on the other hand, "went better than I thought it would go." Declining the offer of help from an Asheville lawyer, Briscoe "felt on the spot" as member of the school board, but, he says, sought to maintain harmony. "We had opposition on both sides, but it didn't get out of hand. We just worked together as people and didn't even lose friendships."

Briscoe himself attended the two-room, one-teacher Long Ridge School at a time when blacks could receive only a seventh-grade education in the county. He recalls the pleasure of winning blue ribbon for crafts at a fair held each fall on McDowell Street in Asheville and the encouragement of a teacher that he become a commercial artist should he have an opportunity to further his formal education.

Of continuous import to his life has been Mt. Olive Church's pastor of 56 years, Dr. Joseph Smith. "He baptized me, my wife, and my children," Briscoe says, "and there ~~has~~ has never been any variableness between him and the people of the community."

The seriousness with which Briscoe takes his own role, since 1955, of deacon, Sunday School superintendent, and choir director is symbolized in the service which the Mt. Olive Choir presents at churches, homecomings, and revivals. The ladies, dressed in white, follow the dark-suited men to the altar singing "None But the Righteous." "We put whatever we have into that theme song," Briscoe says, "so that it will be spiritually touching to us and to the congregation. It is the foundation of Christian living and hope for eternal life."

Of his own life Briscoe says, "I have received much as town employee and in church services over the county. I have made friends who had confidence in me and I in them, and they inspire me to believe the poem I have framed on my wall at home:

"The men who are good and the men who are bad,
As good and as bad as I."