

## Briscoe Retires After 34 Years In Mars Hill

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Citizen Correspondent

MARS HILL — For the first time in 34 years and two months, Manuel Briscoe was free Friday from the responsibility of serving as maintenance supervisor for the town of Mars Hill.

In announcing his retirement to the board of aldermen, he recalled that when he came to work for the town, he and one policeman were the only employees and Mayor Ralph Lee "worked out of his home."

"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.

Briscoe said he is proud of the people of the town who have worked to nearly triple water service by installing meters in 1954, for constructing a 5 million-gallon reservoir lake on Upper Laurel, for adding lines and valves, and for 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 McDowell. 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 here.

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, Briscoe helped his father share crop four or five different farms. It was in taking grain to the mill at the Forks of Ivy that he 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 Mount Olive Baptist

Church.

In 1937, tracts on Long Ridge became available, and Briscoe's father was one of many blacks to purchase land for the first time and to construct houses. Although the father lived only four more years, he left his family with the security of a home and land.

Briscoe credits his father with providing an example of leadership he adopted in becoming a mediator between the black and white communities and a leader in Mount Olive Church.

"At times you take the blues, when someone discredits what you stand for and do with the best intentions," he said of brushes with discrimination.

He knows the pain of paying the fare and then having to push his way through a crowded bus to the rear, of having to "stop at a store for Nabs (cheese crackers) 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 blacks furnished the labor and whites the lines to take water to the black Long Ridge community. Integration of the schools, on the other hand, "went better than I thought it would go," Briscoe said.

Declining the offer of help from an Asheville lawyer, Briscoe "felt on the spot" as a 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.

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 in the men described in 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.'"



— Staff Photo By MALCOLM GAMBLE

**FREE AT LAST** — Manuel Briscoe, Mars Hill's maintenance foreman, smiles at the prospect of retirement after 34 years employment with the town.