

Mississippi stuntmen broke Hollywood color barrier

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(Photo: Gwen Pierce, thechocolatevoice.com)

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Willie Harris couldn't have picked a better time to get shot.

On the other end of the .44 magnum stood Clint Eastwood, playing the ultimate cool role of a police detective in the 1971 movie "Dirty Harry."

Aggravated that his lunch was interrupted by a bank robbery, Eastwood strolls across the street and takes out Harris with one click of the trigger. Still chewing his hot dog. Brushing off a few shotgun pellets to the leg as if they were lint.

And then he delivers the iconic line: "You have to ask yourself one question — Do I feel lucky? Well, do you, punk?"

"I haven't found too many people who don't remember that scene," says Harris, 73, who grew up in the Holmes County community of Howard. "When I tell them that was me falling down the steps, they wonder if I'm joking."

He isn't. Harris, who stands 6-foot-8 and spent a year playing basketball at Alcorn State, was one of the first black stuntmen in Hollywood.

"In the late 1960s, there was one black movie producer that we knew of — Gordon Parks," Harris says. "There were no black people in wardrobe or makeup or operating cameras. I don't like for it to come off as bragging. Young people will just say, 'Aw, you're full of it.' But we changed Hollywood. We busted down the doors for a lot of black people in the movie industry."

Harris is president of the Black Stuntmen's Association, which will be honored Thursday by the Mississippi Legislature at the Capitol in Jackson. Only 14 of the 22 original members are still alive. Eight of those 14 will make the trip.

In addition to Harris, two others are Mississippians: Henry Graddy, who grew up in Meridian but now resides in Gardina, California, and Dewitt Fondren of Walls.

The group has been honored by former California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and the legislature in Nevada, where Harris resides. The Smithsonian is planning an exhibit about the group.

But the Mississippi members say Thursday's tribute will mean the most.

"It's like a dream," says Graddy, who at age 78 still drives an 18-wheeler from California to Destin, Florida, weekly to deliver produce. His son, Henry, often accompanies him. "It's nice to hear that people believe we did something worthwhile and made a difference."

This may not be the best time to mention actor/comedian Bill Cosby, who has been accused by more than 30 women since November with drugging them, sexually assaulting them or both. But Cosby deserves credit for demanding that Hollywood hire a black man to perform his stunts in the secret-agent TV series "I Spy" (1965-68).

At a 2008 event in Las Vegas to honor the first black stuntmen, Calvin Brown of Farmersville, Louisiana, Cosby recalled watching a makeup artist paint a white stunt man black and attach a wig to his head. It was known as a "paint down."

Cosby said in his speech, which can be seen on YouTube, that he told powerful movie producer Sheldon Leonard he "never wanted to see that happen again." Leonard conceded, and Brown performed Cosby's stunts for most of the show's four years. Brown also found work on "Mission: Impossible" and "The Wild, Wild West."

Harris and Fondren landed in California while serving in the military. Graddy went to visit his mother there "and never left."

Each got into the stunt business through acquaintances. Harris' story is perhaps the most bizarre

A friend introduced Harris to Calvin Brown, which was the first time Harris had heard of a stunt man.

Not long after that, he was driving a friend to north Hollywood, got lost and stopped to ask for directions. Harris didn't know he had walked on the set where the 1969 blockbuster "Bob & Carol, Ted & Alice" was being filmed. The person volunteering directions was actor Elliott Gould, who was about to make it big. (Young people, he played the father of Monica on "Friends.")

Gould noticed Harris' tall stature and asked if he'd ever considered stunt work. Harris was open to the idea. Gould met with him the next day and gave him a letter of recommendation by producer Robert Altman to help him gain membership into the Screen Actors Guild.

When Harris went to apply, they required a \$236 membership fee. "I didn't have 36 cents," he says.

He went back to where Gould was filming and told him he couldn't afford to join and thanked him. Gould pulled out his wallet. "Are you married? Kids?" Gould asked. Yes, and three kids, Harris told him.

"Here's the money to cover the fee, and here's another \$300 to spend on your kids," Gould said.

"He was just an incredibly caring man, and I could never repay him for what he did out of the goodness of his heart," Harris says.

He had the chance to thank Gould last October when they were brought together to film a documentary segment about the Black Stuntmen's Association.

Harris worked as a stuntman until 1972 when he broke two vertebra and tore up a knee during a barroom brawl in the movie "Top of the Heap."

"We were a pretty tight-knit group. We had to train ourselves at a park there in Los Angeles, learning how to fall by jumping off a baseball backstop onto cardboard boxes. Renting cars to learn how to do 180's," he said. "I told the guys that even though I couldn't do stunts anymore, I could go around and promote them," he says. "So I went from doing stunts to public relations to president of the Black Stuntmen's Association."

Graddy did plumbing work off and on for 37 years while also performing stunts for 17 years on numerous TV shows and movies such as "Starsky and Hutch" and "The Hardy Boys."

"I was able to get out of it before I got bent up and broke up," he says.

Fondren, 69, worked as a stuntman on the hit TV series "McCloud" in the early 1970s. The show starred Dennis Weaver, who was known for his role as Chester on Gunsmoke. He had served in the Marines with Weaver's son.

"Dennis was a wonderful man with a huge heart," says Fondren, who also worked on the pilot for "M*A*S*H," one of the most popular series in TV history.

The Black Stuntmen's Association "sorta lay stagnant" during the 1980s, Harris says.

"But in 2005, it hit me that a lot of the members were starting to die off," he says. "So I picked it back up in 2005, and I'm really glad. I'm happy to know our story won't die with us."

Contact Billy Watkins at (769) 257-3079 or bwatkins@jackson.gannett.com. Follow [@BillyWatkins11](https://twitter.com/BillyWatkins11) on Twitter.