

Area News...

Harris, Holmes County native, became a stuntman in Hollywood



WILLIE HARRIS AND FRANK JONES RENEWED FRIENDSHIP. Willie Harris (right) and Frank Jones were both young men back in 1960 when Harris left the Jones' plantation headed for Alcorn College. On June 29, Harris visited Jones at Jones' home in Lexington and they renewed their friendship. Harris and Jones had only briefly visited one another once when Jones was administrator at the hospital in Lexington.

July 05, 2006 - How does a poor black kid born in Lexington and raised on a plantation in the Howard Community get to be a stuntman in Hollywood, California?

Call it fate, pure luck, or whatever, it is still a long stretch.

Willie Harris, now in his 70's, living in Las Vegas, Nevada, was back in Holmes County visiting with family and friends, and enjoying a family reunion that was held on Saturday, July 1, Willie stopped by the Holmes County Herald for a visit and talked with us about his role as a stuntman in Hollywood.

We started from the beginning, or near the beginning, as he said his mother was a sharecropper on a plantation at Howard when he was born in 1941 and that is where he was raised. The plantation was owned by Peyton Abbot Jones.

His mother saw that he got an education. He finished elementary school at Mount Zion Elementary that was located on Howard Road and then completed high school at Mileston. According to Mr. Harris, the high school burned and the new high school was moved to its present location on Highway 12, east of Tchula. The elementary school at Howard was replaced by a new elementary school at Mileston.

Willie Harris said he was the first from Mileston High School to go to college on an athletic scholarship. At 6'8", he was a natural for playing basketball and was recruited by Alcorn College in 1960.

Unfortunately, Harris and the Alcorn coach did not see eye to eye, and Harris quit Alcorn and headed for Chicago to find work. After working at several menial jobs, he decided to return to Mississippi and go back to college.

When he arrived back in Lexington in 1962, he learned that his brother had received his draft notice from the U.S. Army. Mr. Harris said he decided to go to the local draft board office in the courthouse and ask if he was about to be drafted. He was told he would receive his notice in October.

Harris went home and talked with his brother about which branch of the service he was to be in and his brother said he had no choice, it would be the Army. Harris said he told his brother what he learned about the date he would be drafted. He added, "I'm not going into the Army. I played basketball and I'm good enough to play in the service. I'm going into the Air Force because they have a great sports program."

After learning that his brother had not been sworn in, they decided to meet with the Air Force recruiter that came to Lexington once a week. The recruiter took them to Jackson where they took an exam and then were accepted into the Air Force.

He got his chance and Harris played basketball for the Air Force for four years and was named to the All Air Force team. In 1964, he was injured while playing in Florida. Later, he was stationed at Kirkland Air Force Base so he could help win ball games for the Kirkland team.

The play was hard on his knees and, according to Harris, the Air Force doctors began to give him shots of steroids to keep him playing. He said this resulted in the deterioration of his knee caps later in life and he had complete knee replacements.

Harris received an honorable discharge in 1967 at Los Angeles, California. After being discharged, he received six offers to play professional ball, but failed the physicals due to his knee injuries.

"It was 1967, I had a wife and three kids, bad knees, and no job," Harris lamented.

One night a friend of his asked him to give him a ride to North Hollywood. After dropping him off, Harris got lost. He said he drove around trying to find someone who

could tell him how to get back to the freeway.

Harris said, "I came up to an intersection where I saw a lot of bright lights and I said someone can tell me something and I stopped. It turned out that they were shooting a movie called Bob & Carol and Ted & Alice starring Elliot Gould, Robert Culp, Natalie Woods, and Diane Cannon being directed by Robert Altman.

"I stopped and asked for directions. While I stood there, this guy walked up to me and asked 'How tall are you?' I told him, and he asked why I was not playing basketball. I told him I have bad knees. He asked, 'What are you doing for a living now?' I told him I can't find a job. He said, 'What would you like to do?' I told him I don't know. Then out of curiosity, I said, 'Who are you?' He said, 'My name is Elliot Gould.'"

Harris said he then asked Gould if he could help him get a job. Gould replied that the only thing he could help him with was getting into the movie business. Gould asked, "Would you like to get into the movie business?" Harris said he told him yes, even though he admits he knew nothing about the movie business.

Gould told Harris to meet him at Columbia Studios the next day to talk with him. Harris said he was so broke he had to borrow money to get up there. After meeting with Gould, he introduced Harris to Director Robert Altman. Altman wrote a letter for Harris to take to the Screen Actors Guild that said Altman would hire Harris.

"I didn't know it cost \$236 to join the Guild. I didn't have 36 cents, so I went back to see Gould to say that I don't have \$236 to join the Screen Actors Guild. He told me to come back tomorrow and he would give me the money. I went back and he gave me the money to join the Guild.

"He then asked me if I was married and did I have any kids. I told him I was married and had three kids, one only 2 weeks old. Gould said, 'Since you are low on funds, what does that kid have?' I answered, 'Really, nothing.' So he gave me another \$200 to get the kid clothes.

I joined the Screen Actors Guild and got my Screen Actors Guild card. About a week later, I visited a friend and told her about Gould helping me to get into the movie business, but that I didn't know what to do. She asked if I could act and I told her no. She then told me about a former classmate, Calvin Brown, from Grambling who was working in Hollywood as a stuntman.

Before Brown had become the first black stuntman, white stuntman would paint themselves black to double for a black actor. So, the entrance of black stuntmen was met with resistance because they were competition for the stuntmen jobs.

The Black Stuntmen's Association was formed in 1968 by Calvin Brown and Eddie Smith. In 1970-71 they published a book that listed 25 men and 2 women, including Willie Harris. It showed their photo and listed their height and weight.

Harris said his meeting with Brown resulted in his becoming a member of the Black Stuntmen's Association, the only 6'8" stuntman around. After going through training that Brown provided, Harris got his first job playing a boxer.

Harris said when he first started, the pay was the same as that for an extra, a low price. He said that later, we began to demand and received the same pay that the white stuntmen were receiving. A regular stuntman was paid \$136 for one stunt. If they hired you for a week the pay was \$800. If you received an adjustment for doing a number of stunts and maybe a lot of shots from different angles, the pay was from \$1,000 to \$2,000.

"My big break came in Dirty Harry in 1971. There was a bank robbery scene where they had a robber coming out of the bank and Clint Eastwood was across the street. When Eastwood shot the robber out of the bank there were steps about three feet high. I was the stuntman for this scene. I did the roll down the steps into the street."

Things were going well for Harris until 1974 when he let his director talk him into doing a stunt with an actor instead of another stuntman because the actor wanted to do his own stunt. "This was the biggest mistake I ever made. He kicked me in the back and crushed the 4th and 5th vertebrae in my back. After having back surgery in 1974, I was forced to retire."

Harris said he still remained active with the group even after he had to retire from doing stunts. One of his last jobs was playing the role of a boxer on the Carol Burnett Show in late 1976. He also was used for the magazine layout when the first 747 airplane was put into service by Pan American. He was photographed stretched out to show how much seating room the new airplane had.

By 1977, he had gone through 10 knee surgeries due to the deterioration from the steroid shots received during his days in the Air Force, plus the back surgery.

In July 2004, Harris moved to Las Vegas and in May 2005, he and his son began H&H Installation.

In February, 2006, Las Vegas Councilman Lawrence Weekly heard about Harris and the Black Stuntmen's Association. He invited the remaining members, all retired, to attend a council meeting in February as part of the emphasis on Black History Month. The five members, three men and two women, received a plaque and certificates from the city of Las Vegas for making history and revolutionizing Hollywood.

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