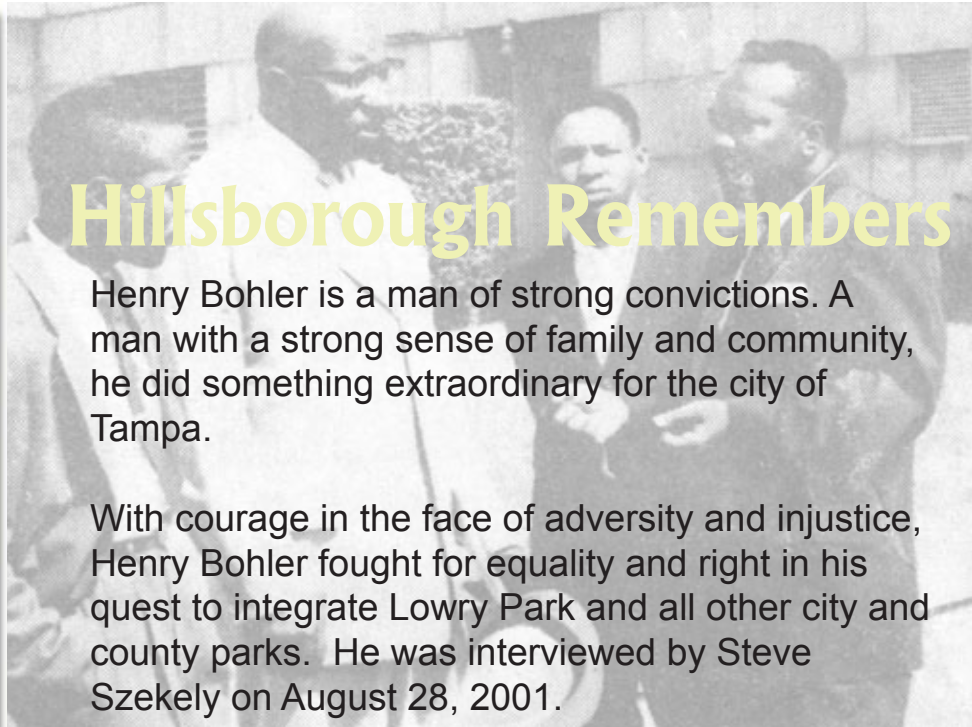




## Henry Bohler



### Hillsborough Remembers

Henry Bohler is a man of strong convictions. A man with a strong sense of family and community, he did something extraordinary for the city of Tampa.

With courage in the face of adversity and injustice, Henry Bohler fought for equality and right in his quest to integrate Lowry Park and all other city and county parks. He was interviewed by Steve Szekely on August 28, 2001.

*This is an interview with Henry Bohler (HB) of Tampa, Florida. Mr. Bohler is known these days mostly for, as a former Tuskegee Airmen, a member the famous Tuskegee Airmen, but uh, in 1960, he became very famous in the Tampa area for desegregating Lowry Park. This interview is being conducted on August 21, 2001 at Mr. Bohler's home in Tampa. My name is Steve Szekely (SS), representing the Tampa Hillsborough County Public Library System's Oral History Collection Project.*

**Steve Szekely:** *Ah, Mr. Bohler, can you tell us how this uh, the event happened in Lowry Park?*

**Henry Bohler:** We were simply out riding one day and the kids spotted the park and they wanted to go to the park. And as a result of that, we decided to stop. We had no idea that it was segregated and the whites owned that. So, we stopped, only to be turned away, because uh, of our race and color.

And then we decided we would go back and actually get arrested, if it took that. And we took several, uh, people with us, well, four. One was as uh, dark as the ace of spades. One was very light skinned. Eldon Banfield was the very light skinned one. And we had another person of uh, varying, varying color. But because the ( ) was as black as the ace of spades, had a passport and at that time, any foreigner had stamped on his passport white, he could go in. Yet uh, Eldon Banfield, who was very fair, with straight hair, could not because he was, indeed, as they called in those days, a Negro.

But, uh, we decided to go in and stay and uh, because they called the law, the police were called, and we were to be arrested. But through negotiations, they said uh... "Let's go outside and

talk about this then." And we went outside to talk, and then uh, we went to Lowry Park's office, uh, to negotiate but that didn't do any good. Then we went to several offices to negotiate and that didn't do any good.

**SS:** *And you were looking for admission?*

**HB:** That's right.

**SS:** *That's your, that was your goal?*



Henry Bohler, Rev. A. Leon Lowry, Clarence Fort, and Atty. F. A. Rodriguez discuss next move to promote integrating city parks in Sept., 1960.

**HB:** That was, uh, the goal. And, uh, finally, it got down to the point that I was going to go. And I decided to file suit, and I secured the lawyer, and I filed suit in Federal Court. Because at that time, I was a tax payer and that time, I had kids who sorely wanted to go to that park. And regardless to the threats that were made, that we were filin' suit, uh, the city did not buckle. It was uh, Julian Lane, at that time and later on, Nick Nuccio. But they all refused and uh, consequently, we filed suit in federal court, and eventually won!

**SS:** *And it took how long?*

**HB:** Two and a half years.

**SS:** *What did the uh, what did the city do in the, what were there arguments in the uh, in the lawsuit?*

**HB:** The arguments were that the parks were not really segregated, but, that you just had undesirable people (laughing) that couldn't go and that was it.

**SS:** *The park wasn't segregated, but admissions office was.*

**HB:** That's right.

**SS:** *How did the uh, how did the authorities treat you during the time the suit was uh, under way.*

**HB:** Um, very badly (laugh) because on uh, several nights, I couldn't even get into my house.

**SS:** *Because...*

**HB:** Because there were those who were denying me the right to get out, get into the house and uh...

**SS:** *These were ruffians, toughnecks, er, roughnecks.*

**HB:** I would say that there were actually from the police because...

**SS:** *But not in uniform?*

**HB:** ...but not in uniform, see. And uh, on a couple of occasions, I was turned away and went down to Central Avenue to get a friend of mine's advice. And Johnny Gray, who was a friend, and we called the city, and they were very busy that night. They didn't have anybody that they could send. So uh, we finally ended up callin' the Sheriff's Department and askin' for two black deputies. They could come but, because the ruffians, or what ever you want to call 'em, were white, they had to send white deputies as well.

And uh, on that particular night, I was able to get into the house.

The next night, uh, it was the same. I had been to an NAACP meeting of some nature, and uh, when I called, it was the same excuse. They were so busy that they didn't have anybody to call to come. And uh, as a result, I told them that I didn't need any protection that night because I had plenty, and uh, I was more concerned about the people who were outside my house. So then, when I decided to go in, a police car drove up and said, "You are under arrest." I said, "For what?" "For carryin' concealed weapon." I said, "I don't have any weapon." And, he searched me. I said, "But I'm glad you are here, because now, I can get into my house." And that was it.

And uh, there were several instances where uh, I would be stopped. And on one occasion when I went to court, court, uh, the judge even went along with the system and changed the location.

**SS:** *The description of the, of the incident?*

**HB:** That's right, to find me guilty. And of course, it was only ten dollars, I say, a, a ten dollar fine or something like that. And some white woman volunteered to pay it, but I refused her paying the fine, because I wanted to go to jail. And they didn't, so he suspended the fine [laughing] rather than lock me up.

**SS:** *So they, they wouldn't call your bluff?*

**HB:** That's right.

**SS:** *It wasn't a bluff though, you had every intention on going to jail.*

**HB:** I had every intention on going to jail because, then I could show the public what the city was like.

**SS:** *How did the case resolve itself after two and a half years?*

***you had, at that time,  
segregated water fountains,  
in the City Hall.***

**HB:** We won the suit, but there uh, there was not an injunction issued, because then, through negotiations and what have you, uh, they had secretly opened the parks and there was not a necessity for an injunction.

**SS:** *Was the park, in fact, desegregated at that point? Were there African American children going into the park before the ruling came down?*

**HB:** Well, uh no! The ruling and the publishing, the publishing of the ruling in the paper started African Americans to go into the park.

**SS:** *But the policy had been changed, but they just didn't make it known.*

**HB:** They didn't make it known.

**SS:** *At that point, did you have a party? Did a lot of people go to the party just to, just to celebrate the victory?*

**HB:** No, in fact, it was, uh, over a year before I went! [laughing] It was over a year before I went...to the park.

**SS:** *Were there other similar public facilities that were, were segregated in the same way?*

**HB:** You had all of the parks and all of the playgrounds, uh...this playground that's on 15th Street. Uh, I can't recall the name of it now, but, it was, it had

a swimming pool. And blacks could not swim in that water. That was before the swimming pool was build over here at Sarah's Green. And uh, that was uh, another instance where you just couldn't go. And you had, at that time,

segregated water fountains, in the City Hall.

**SS:** *This is 1962-63?*

**HB:** That's right! You had segregated uh, water fountains in City Hall and in the courthouse. And I would go every morning to uh, needle Julian Lane, as he came in and I would drink from the white fountain. [laughing]

**SS:** *Did the authorities do anything about that?*

**HB:** No!

**SS:** *Gave you dirty looks!!*

**HB:** No, they gave dirty looks and eventually, they consolidated the fountains. But at that time you had uh, white restrooms and black restrooms in this city.

**SS:** *Was it all done, the change gradual at that point?*

**HB:** Uh, it was gradual.

**SS:** *No big announcements of....they were changing everything?*

**HB:** No, uhn uhh, no announcements whatsoever. But it just evolved into democratic type thing.

**SS:** *So African Americans would have to find out for themselves by...*

**HB:** That is correct.

**SS:** *Did the word pass around the community at all?*

**HB:** Oh yes! It, it did, but you've, you've got remember that the older people were afraid anyway, and they never did go. You have to have almost a new generation to come about.

**SS:** *Was there a lot of fear in the, in challenging the city in this uh, this kind of way?*

**HB:** There was fear in uh, challenging the city, but you got to remember that it was an economic thing. Uh, teachers who challenged the system got kicked out. There was the case for uh, black teachers and white teachers had different salary scales. And uh, Ben Griffin and uh, the lady on 21st Avenue, who uh, Young, Mrs. Young, they challenged the system and went to court and they lost their jobs. So, it was not popular to uh, challenge the system.

***they challenged the system  
and went to court and they  
lost their jobs***

**SS:** *How did they challenge the system?*

**HB:** They went to court to equalize the salary.

**SS:** *Ok, to equalize the salary.*

**HB:** Yeah, between whites and blacks.

**SS:** *Now the schools not integrated at that point, right?*

**HB:** No.

**SS:** *Not at all?*

**HB:** You had black schools and you had white schools.

**SS:** *When did the uh, when did the schools get integrated here?*

**HB:** I can't remember the date exactly, but it was in the 60's.

**SS:** *And it was court instigated that caused the... the uh, integration...*

**HB:** That's right!

**SS:** *Did your children uh, go to integrated schools or segregated schools?*

**HB:** Uh, my oldest son finished Middleton, which was uh, segregated school, and my two younger ones, they went to Hillsborough.

**SS:** *Did they uh, prefer the integrated schools, better facilities uh, how did they react?*

**HB:** Well, you, you got to remember that the facilities at Middleton, you had second hand books because they had to come from the other schools and uh, it was just, you, you didn't have any laboratory uh, facilities or whatever, and I mean chemistry labs. And to get an education at Hillsborough was uh, an entire plus, see.

**SS:** *You are involved these days in a, in a crew, the Mystic Aircrew, is that the name?*

**HB:** That's right, Ye Mystic Aircrew.

**SS:** *And that is a Gasparilla-recognized...You participate in the Gasparilla...?*

**HB:** That's right. I fly formation over the parades. And we do other formation flyin' up at Bushnell, over the cemeteries on Memorial Day and Labor Day and what have you.

**SS:** *Now, for years the Gasparilla Celebration was a, a segregated affair...*

**HB:** That is right. The only uh, integration that there was, when I came to Tampa was, they had a little jail uh, bein' pulled as the last float. And there was a black person in that jail [pause]. And of course, uh, you had sanitation workers because they had a lot of horses in the Parade and they had on their overalls and they scooped up the poop from [laugh] the horses, you see.

**SS:** *Well, when did Ye Mystic Aircrew uh, begin to participate or when did you begin to participate in Gasparilla?*

**HB:** I uh, I, I began to participate about seven years ago, six years ago, when uh, I was asked to join Ye Mystic Aircrew. and that was the air wing of the, uh, the air crews and I went in and had no trouble.

**SS:** *They welcomed you, I assume it was all white at that point.*

**HB:** Yeah it was, it was. Uh, and Neil Constantino uh, who originated the Ye Mystic Aircrew. He saw me flying at the uh, air port, Peter O. Knight, and he knew that I owned an airplane. So, he asked me in. Well I'm sure that he got permission from all the rest of them before hand and acceptance was favorable.

**SS:** *You, uh, what's, what's your opinion of race relations now in, in Tampa?*

**HB:** They have improved quite a bit. But there is still work to be done.

**SS:** *How's that?*

**HB:** Because uh, you, you have... It's not out and out, but you experience it. You can actually go into a restaurant and, some of the restaurants, and uh, you have to wait until everybody else is served. But uh, it is like I said, a lot better than it used to be. But there are a lot of things to be desired.

Then there is employment. You know that uh, if you and I were applying for a position, you would have an edge, regardless of what your qualifications were, as opposed to mine in gettin' any type of employment. And you can see yourself that, uh, in the city structure, or in the county structure, there are not the positions at the top which are filled.

Although, you do have a black police chief and what have you. That is one of those things that came about, and I can't say why it came about but, uh, but that was just one position. Others are unfilled by blacks.

**SS:** *Going back in the 60's, uh, were there any repercussions that you felt, after the Lowry Park suit was settled or decided.*

**HB:** No, there was not. But, uh, I wouldn't have known about it anyway, because uh, I made my way and uh, I just didn't care what others thought, you see.

**SS:** *So you didn't want to be a headliner again?*

**HB:** No, uh, uh.

**SS:** *You've done your bit.*

**HB:** *I've done my..., paid my dues.*

**SS:** *Okay.*

**HB:** *To come into town and to see things like they were. And to come from a town where my sister had been run out of town, because she had a master's degree and demanded a position in the School System...*

**SS:** *Uh, was this Augusta?*

**HB:** *Yea, and uh, the then, Fire Chief came to my father's house and said, "Lewis, you and I have been friends for years. We grew up on adjoining farms in South Carolina. And uh, but according to the times, your daughter had done wrong and if you don't have money, I'm going to give you money now, because she is gonna have to leave town tomorrow."*

**SS:** *What would happen if she hadn't left town? What do you think?*

**HB:** *Uh, beatings, killings and what have you. Uh, just like it used to happen in Georgia. And that type of thing always stuck in my mind and I was determined to get an education, and then to do what I could to uh, stamp out that type of thing.*

**SS:** *Who were some of the figures, the people that, that uh, you were involved with in this, this fight for Lowry Park and, and related issues?*

**HB:** *Uh, I think, well, Nick Nuccio and Julian Lane.*

**SS:** *The mayors.*

**HB:** *The mayors. And uh, we negotiated with them several times and I can't think of just one who uh, oh! Sumter Lowry. I went to even*

*negotiate with him and he turned me down flat, because he was the one that donated Lowry Park.*

**SS:** *Would he, would he talk to you or just, did he listen?*

**HB:** *Well, he listened, but he didn't hear. And uh, he and I were both Episcopalians but, that did not make any difference, see. No, Sumter Lowry was one of the ones, because he had indeed, given Lowry Park to the city.*

**SS:** *Now on your side there were some big league figures uh, working on your team.*

**HB:** *Oh yeah, well, Thurgood Marshal, he became the Supreme Court judge uh, delegated uh, Constance Baker Motley to come to Tampa to work with my lawyer, Francisco Rodriguez and uh, we had some big guns.*

**SS:** *How did trial, uh, go on, was it a big deal?*

**HB:** *Oh yes, it was it was a big deal, a lot of name calling and what have you. "This boy" [laughing] and uh, "these man," and what have you, but that was a sign of the times at that time.*

**SS:** *Did the, the judge didn't rule out that kind of talk.*

**HB:** *No! No!*

**SS:** *That's amazing, isn't it?*

**HB:** *That is a fact.*

**SS:** *Did your lawyers object to the characterizations or was there really a basis to object?*

**HB:** *They were uh, soft peddlin', because there was no legal implications.*

**SS:** *They were more interested in winning the case...*

**HB:** That's right!

**SS:** *...than winning of a motion here and there.*

**HB:** Yeah.

**SS:** *Makes good sense. Did it have to go appeal, or was, did the District Court just handle the whole thing by itself.*

**HB:** No! No! No, the appellate court here, uh, handled the whole thing.

**SS:** *Why do you think the city didn't appeal, and make bigger deal out of it?*

**HB:** Because uh, you've got to remember that uh, the school suit to integrate the suit of the school system had already come to pass and.....

**SS:** *But it wasn't decided yet, right, it was, had the trial, but not decided...*

**HB:** That's right, but uh, you were, everybody knew what the outcome would eventually be, so there was no need to appeal and appeal and appeal.

**SS:** *What did the uh, can you, do you remember the Judge said in his ruling?*

**HB:** No!

**SS:** *Did he say anything positive made you feel good or just uh...*

**HB:** No!

**SS:** *Bang the gavel and said (laughter) the case is closed?*

**HB:** That's it. Uh, the decision was made and that was just it!

**SS:** *Do you remember the basis for the decision?*

**HB:** No, I don't remember.

**SS:** *Not that it matters that much!*

**HB:** Ah, Ah, several articles that stipulated the rulings.

**SS:** *Yeah, well this predates the Civil Rights Act of '64 which would now be the basis for a suit.*

**HB:** This was 50 some odd years ago, 'bout 50 years ago.

**SS:** *It's amazing isn't it!*

**HB:** Yes!

*[End of tape]*

*[End of interview]*