


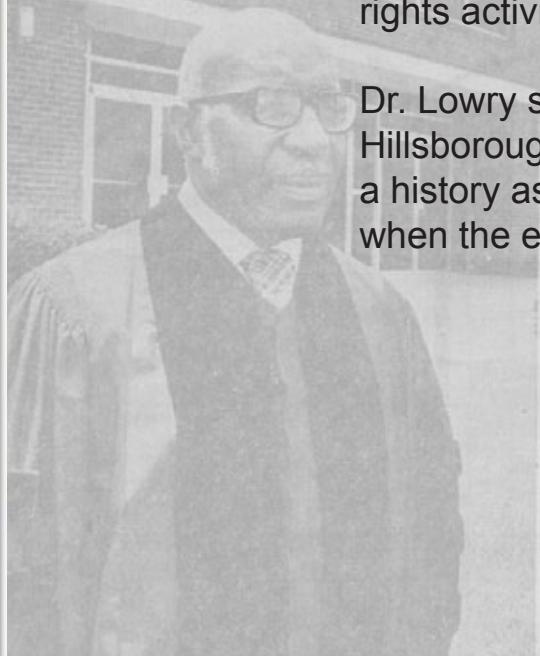


## *Dr. A. Leon Lowry*

### Hillsborough Remembers

The Civil Rights movement in Hillsborough County had many outstanding leaders. One of the foremost was the Rev. Dr. A. Leon Lowry, religious leader, civil rights activist, public servant.

Dr. Lowry shares his memories of Hillsborough County, preserving a history as important today as when the events took place.



The new sanctuary at Cypress and Delaware: is a tribute to the Rev. A. Leon Lowry has brought the membership to 500. Trib- photos by Dan Fager.

*This is an interview with Dr. Leon Lowry (LL) of Tampa. The interview is being conducted on September 7, 2001 at Dr. Lowry's home in Tampa. Uh, my name is Steve Szekely (SS) representing the Tampa Hillsborough County Public Library System's Oral History Collection Project.*

[START TAPE 1, SIDE A]

**Steve Szekely:** *I wanted to get some background information on the tape before we started talking, Dr. Lowry. Uh, you were born in Savannah, uh you attended, graduated from Morehouse College in Atlanta, uh then uh, went to the seminary at ( ) Newton Theological School and did gradu...post graduate work at Boston University and Harvard, uh and became a pastor in Massachusetts.*

***there would be many hurdles to jump before it was actually put into practice.***

**Leon Lowry:** *That's true.*

**SS:** *Uh then, uh returned to Georgia and became a pastor at, there and came to uh, to Tampa in 1956 to be pastor of the Beulah Baptist Church...*

**LL:** *That's right.*

**SS:** *...and subsequent to that you were the president of the state NAACP organization...*

**LL:** *That's right...*

**SS:** *...and became the first African-American elected to a county-wide office since reconstruction, in 1976 when you were elected to the school board.*

**LL:** *True.*

**SS:** *Now you must not have made too may lasting enemies as a civil rights activist ,since they did name a school after you. Uh, ....*

**LL:** *That's right.*

**SS:** *In 1956, when you came here, that was shortly after the Brown vs. Board of Education decision that, that ruled outlawed the separate but equal concept....*

**LL:** *Yes.*

**SS:** *How did that make you feel when it, when it happened?*

**LL:** *Well, I was elated. I knew, though, that uh, there would be many hurdles to jump before it was actually put into practice. For instance, in Tampa, it*

*was not accepted, but, strangely enough...after some little reluctance, the Hillsborough County School Board accepted my youngest son as a student. I was not in the city at the time he entered Bayside School and, as I understand, there were no arousements, uh, no protests. Police were there, but nothing untoward happened. They just accepted him and that was it. And everybody seemed to have loved him. He's handicapped of course, he lacked hearing. But uh, they accepted him and loved him and worked with him until it came to the point where he could no longer, um, well, could no longer move among them and we had to put him away. And that was it.*

**SS:** *Uh, why, given that kind of start, why did it have to go to the courts, to uh, get final desegregation?*

**LL:** Well, that's another story. Some other families encountered the resistance of the school board and that, I don't know exactly, I've never understood really, why, but uh, the Saunders and some people from Port Tampa had to go to court to force the school board to accept their children. I've never really understood fully, why the difference, uh, it uh, it's a strange thing. But, eventually those children were accepted, after the struggle, the battle. I cannot for the life of me understand why just, just why I thought about it, but uh, maybe someone intervened and threw a monkey wrench into the thing, and made it uh, maybe they thought they were just bowing down, yielding too quickly without putting up a fight.

**SS:** *Of course, Tampa wasn't unique at the time. I mean, virtually every city in the south had that same problem.*

**LL:** That's right, that's right. Only Tampa did it without violence. They didn't have any violence and it was eventually accepted.

**SS:** *Um, after you came here in 1956, what was your, your first overt or public act uh, towards, in the civil rights era?*

**LL:** Well, one was refusal to ride the buses. Uh, to get on the bus and to ride in the back of the bus. I would walk from Belmont Heights, or ride a bicycle, or even drove. I refused absolutely, that was the first overt act. And uh, then the next, of course, was going downtown, making an attempt [ clears throat ] to be fed at the lunch counters, and naturally, refused. Uh then uh, one of the youngsters, Clarence Fort, at the time, decided that they would uh, publicly boycott the stores. So, I joined with them and uh, instructed them.

Prior to going downtown, we met at St. Paul's Church and uh, prior to going downtown, instructed them as to behavior; how to act, to conduct themselves, carrying only their textbooks or a bible, not a hatpin, not a knife, or anything like that. And, just ask to be served, which they did. And, of course, the lunch counter shut down.

And this went on for about a month. Uh, downtown became a sort of a deserted island, like. People refused to go because they thought there was going to be some violence. But there wasn't. And eventually, the merchants saw that business was falling off and they were losing. So they requested a meeting. And we held a meeting at uh, the Old Exchange National Bank, in the boardroom.

I shall never forget. They just sat, that is, the merchants just sat and listened to us, didn't say a word. I became so upset about the fact that they didn't say anything. I got up and started to walk out. So Mr. Thomas, Bob Thomas, came and said, "No, no, no, stay, they're listening, they're listening." And, so they were. And uh, finally they got through talking and they said, "Well, let's meet again a month hence." So, we met a month later.

At that time, thee came prepared to ascertain how could we go about desegregating the lunch counters. So we hit up on a plan, whereby, selected couples would go in and be seated. All of the lunch counters and restaurants would be served and they were to tip the waiters or the waitresses. And of course, the waiters and the waitresses were instructed how to behave. This we did reveal to the newspapers.

**SS:** *None of this?*

**LL:** No, none of this. [ clears throat ]  
And it turned out very well, very well.  
No violence. And from that point on, it  
just, just happened.

**SS:** *The precedent had been set and  
people accepted it.*

**LL:** And then, the next thing was to  
uh, help at the theaters. The upstairs  
seating, the uh, buzzard roost.  
(laughs) And uh, we came downstairs.  
Nothing.

Then the next came the Tampa Bus  
Line. We threatened to boycott the  
Tampa Bus Line. But before they got  
to that point, I've forgotten the name  
of the individual who represented the  
bus company. The headquarters for  
the bus system was Chicago, but the  
individual who was here, he came with  
a proposition, that we would hire five  
or six black bus drivers. To our  
surprise, they were to be hired to drive  
the entire city. We had asked that they  
only be drivers in the black areas, but  
they went one step farther than that.  
And so, that was done.

The next thing was the telephone  
company. Mr. Levy, was, yes, yes,  
he's deceased now. He was the  
president and we hit upon the scheme  
where blacks would go to school and  
be taught about handling the long  
distance calls and operating on the  
telephone.

Uh, by that time, we had also formed  
a um, community... no, the  
Commission of Community Relations  
which was done by the City Council.  
And we were to go into hotspots and  
try to alleviate the problems. This  
succeeded very well. And we had one  
or two uprisings, but not of the group  
of which we were associated, another  
group, so they had an uprising at the  
bus station, but nothing of serious  
magnitude. So that's the way it  
occurred.

**SS:** *In the initial efforts, in the, say,  
the white counters, did you have  
support from any of the people in the  
white community?*

**LL:** Yes, we had the Merchant's  
Association. I'm trying to recall, there  
was Mr. Cody Fowler, Bob Thomas,  
Sandy Moffitt and there was a  
gentleman who was over Sears  
Roebuck, I can't recall his name. But,  
those individuals were there. The  
others, there were some, well, there  
was resistance, of course, but not  
enough to counteract the um, the  
doings of those who were for it. In  
fact, we didn't advertise very much. It  
was all done very, very quietly.

**SS:** *Did any people, white people join  
you on picket lines or they...*

**LL:** No, not at all.

**SS:** *Did that disappoint you?*

**LL:** Well,...

**SS:** *I mean, it's a sign of solidarity...*

**LL:** ... it was, it was, but we didn't  
worry about that. Now the resistance,  
uh, on one occasion, at one of the  
stores downtown, was a little man in a  
long coat, following me. And under  
this coat, he had a baseball bat and  
police discovered this. So they got me  
away, got me home. And uh, his  
intentions were to brain me with the  
baseball bat. Another incident that  
occurred, one night, oh, perhaps 3:00  
or 4:00 in the morning, there were  
shots fired into my home.

**SS:** *This home?*

**LL:** Not this home, it was another one,  
over on Delaware. I had just gotten up  
to answer the telephone, some  
relatives had called from the Virginia.  
They were snowbound. They were

headed this way. And the shots were fired into the master bedroom. And uh, they uh, they intended to intimidate me, to frighten me, but that didn't occur.

**SS:** *When, when was this?*

**LL:** This was back at the height of the movement, and pardon me for a lapse of memory, I cannot pinpoint the year. Unfortunately, I did not write all of this down. I just regret so much, as I look back, that I didn't write it down. And uh, a friend of mine had said why don't you write, but I didn't bother to write it.

***Unfortunately, I did not write all of this down.  
I just regret so much, as I look back, that  
I didn't write it down.***

We would have uh, our telephone would go off about 9:00, 8:30 or 9:00 in the evening, I had no phone. And we knew this was deliberate. The next morning, the phone service would be restored.

**SS:** *Did you, do you think it was the telephone company employee?*

**LL:** Oh, it had to be, it had to be somebody...

**SS:** *Acting officially or acting on his or her own.*

**LL:** Oh, might, might be on his own. I couldn't think of acting officially, the telephone company doing this. But this happened. Uh.....

**SS:** *And did, I assume, that frightened you, to be out of touch?*

**LL:** Well, it made me more determined than ever, to continue. And the night when the shots were fired, the television people came, Channel 13 and 8. "What are you gonna do,

Reverend? I said, "Well, it makes me more determined than ever to continue until this is over."

Uh, then we had all kinds of intimidating telephone calls, threats of course, we never knew who perpetrators were, I mean, just knew to expect calls and that went on for a while.

And some fellas from Main Street, what we would refer to as riffraff, came and said, "You go to bed. Just fix us some coffee and donuts and we'll stand watch. If anything occurs, we'll take care of it." That gave me a

deeper appreciation for them. I never did look down on them. They gave me a deeper appreciation that they would be willing to risk their lives and they didn't even know me. But uh, those were the...

**SS:** *Now I assume these were black men that were...*

**LL:** Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, uh...

**SS:** *Did the, did the authorities at the police department give you support or ...*

**LL:** Yes, yes, the Mayor, Mayor Lane then, Julian Lane, said there would be no rioting or anything of that nature. And he took care of the police department. Chief Brown, was uh, chief of that time. I don't whether he still lives or whether he's deceased or not. Then another occasion, we went to the beach, the causeway. We hadn't been there too long before two truckloads of uh, white men armed with pipes and so forth, came out to drive us away from the beach. And

someone, evidently, called the police, because they were there and that was avoided.

**SS:** *Now this, was this a family group. Children and women and children as well as....*

**LL:** I guess so, women, children, and who, and adults, who were with us.

**SS:** *But the intent was amusement, not to make a point. I mean, not trying to desegregate the beach, at that point.*

**LL:** No. And uh, I was surprised to hear the vitriol, the, the cursing, that came from the white women, because I always felt that they were ladies, but uh....

**SS:** *Flowers of southern womanhood.*

**LL:** Yes, yes. So uh, but that passed away. And from then on, just, just, very quietly, it happened. It happened.

**SS:** *Let me ask you about the uh, Chambers incident in, uh, 1967 where a young man was, was shot by the police and there was a reaction in the community...a violent reaction.*

**LL:** Yea, a violent reaction and so forth. We felt that that was very, very wrong. That he had his back turned and he was trying to escape. At that time, of course, involvement of escaping felon would be subject to be shot. But uh, really, nothing came of it, but it did spill over uh, onto Broadway and stores were broken into, ransacked. But strangely enough, nothing occurred downtown. Maas Brothers, none of those stores, um, Wolf Brothers, ( ), um, none, none of them. It all happened away from downtown.

**SS:** *Why do you think that is?*

**LL:** We don't know why. And of course, Central Avenue was destroyed, which was uh, a black shopping area. A lot of the black businesses never came back. Uh, that was a kind of implosion. Uh, they destroyed their own community and uh, the nearby areas instead of going downtown. But why they did not go downtown, I don't know.

**SS:** *Was, I understand that they, the uh, National Guard came out and there were troops brought in, but they didn't get actively involved.*

**LL:** ( ).

**SS:** *I think the thing that interests me most about that incident is that, was it your committee, that committee you referred to, that went into the....*

**LL:** We had to...yeah, we had a group called the White Hats, led by Jim Hammond. Whoever had on a white hat was a friend and not a foe. They were able to talk to people and calm them down and prevent any further destruction. Uh, and for that um, they were rewarded in a sense, well, not necessarily rewarded but they were um, given tokens. I guess that was a reward, certificates and so forth.

**SS:** *From the City?*

**LL:** For participating. Uh, so that went off smoothly. And uh....

**SS:** *It's interesting that when situations flare up these days, that same practice isn't followed. I mean, police go in and exacerbate the situation.*

**LL:** Yeah, they exacerbate, they put out the fire and sort of calm things down.

**SS:** *What did the White Hats tell the young people that were fighting?*

**LL:** Well, they told them, yeah, they told them that, "You are destroying your own community. You're hurting, not hurting the white people, but you are doing the damage to yourselves," and think about it. And they did, and that sort of calmed things down.

The strange thing about Tampa is that, while we had just little skirmishes, nothing of major proportion compared to what happened in Jacksonville, Pensacola and St. Augustine. Nothing of that nature and we went by the theory that we had problems, but we could solve those problems ourselves, left to ourselves. And I think we proved that. Uh, reporters came from other cities, St. Louis, Missouri, Chicago and so forth, and we told them that we were able to recognize that we had problems, long-standing problems, and they were historical from way back, the roots were deep. But we believed the same people sitting down together around a table recognizing that there were problems and seeing what we could do to solve those problems. And that paid great dividends, and we looked at the problems, recognized them, and then we tried, one by one, to deal with them, the school situation, the lunch counters, and so forth and proceeded.

**SS:** *Did you credit the white leadership for having more understanding than leaders of other cities?*

**LL:** I think so, yes, yes, yes. We had some powerful men, uh, who were respected by the white community and they, in turn, were able to talk to the white community.

And, on our side, they had Perry Harvey, Blythe Andrews, sort of pillars of the community. And we were able to convey to our people, the insanity

of destroying your own community. And somehow, we were able to get it over to them and gradually, there was a meeting with the minds. And uh, that way we accomplished. The telephone company became a success. Uh, they hired uh, one, Willy Mitchell, became a linesman for the telephone company, and after him, many, many others. And then many got in as operators. Whereas, they had never had a black, other than a maid and a handyman, that's all. And, uh, then they opened up.

I forget what... There was one thing, on one examination, that had a chance, they asked the question, what was an ottoman? The blacks didn't know what an ottoman was, and find, just a footstool. So, and then they knocked things like that out...and so...

**SS:** *That's a very Victorian word – ottoman.*

**LL:** Oh yeah, yeah. They had never heard of it. Now, the same exam was given to those in the east. They knew, in other parts of the country, they knew. But here in the south, they did not know. That's one of the little asides, but uh, all in all, things went well. They were very strict. If you were late so many times, then you were out of the program. And uh, it went well, went well.

**SS:** *Let me fast forward to the 70s and the school board race. Uh, that was an at-large election?*

**LL:** At large.

**SS:** *Countywide?*

**LL:** Countywide, uh huh.

**SS:** *That surprised me when I read that. I expected the pioneer had come from a, uh, single member district.*

**LL:** Yeah I, uh was surprised too, I had, um, about 35,000 white votes to 8,000 blacks. And I went to places like Brandon, and again, to my surprise, "Put your sign in our yard." And I won't say it was an abrupt change, but perhaps, uh, that the time had elapsed, everything had soaked in, nothing negative. Everywhere I went I was accepted. And I was shocked. Brandon and out here at, uh, Apollo Beach, and areas like that, not one vestige of resentment.

**SS:** *That's amazing.*

**LL:** It was amazing. And I could not account for it. And I thought about it and thought about it, but uh, the people were very nice, very nice. Nothing untoward. No words of "get away from here, Nigger" or anything like that. Nothing.

***there were one or two white candidates and I far out-distanced both of them in the race and became the first black member of the school board.***

**SS:** *What made you want to run? Was there, were there incidents?*

**LL:** Well, I, no, I hadn't thought of it. And uh, Senator Frank, Pat Frank, came one Sunday afternoon. And as I recall, asked if she could come over, so she did. I told her, yes, so we went over to the church, to the study. And she said, "Why don't you run for the school board? I'm going to the legislature." And then I thought about it. And I said, "Well, I guess I will." She said, "Well, you seem to be the logical one to run." And so, that's how that came about. I had previously way sometime prior to that, thought about running and was talked out of it. But uh, this time she talked me into running for the school board and so I threw my hat in the ring, and there was um, one or two....

[END TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[START TAPE 1, SIDE B]

**LL:** ...there were one or two white candidates and I far out-distanced both of them in the race and became the first black member of the school board. And I had white support, well considerable, the 38,000 and 8,000 blacks and that was it. And on the school board, if there were any member of the board that resented me, they didn't show it. Uh, they accepted me. And my thing was that I represented not only black children, but white children as well. I think that was one of the things that um, caught the fancy of the white community, that I would go on the board, not just as a black board member, but universally representing all the children. I mean, what could one black member do with six other white... Why they could outvote you any time. So I reasoned

that I represent everybody, not just the blacks. What I asked for one, I asked for others. I was just as fair to the whites and fair to the blacks. If I voted for a black to be expelled, I voted for a white to be expelled. I was chastised by one or two black people for the stand that I took, but that was my stand. And I've told others who've gone on the City Council, I said, "You represent not just that little area, but you represent the entire city. The legislature and so forth, although in this particular instance, you represent a district, but you represent everybody. So that's the way that you would make it when that happened."

**SS:** *How long did you serve on the school board?*

**LL:** 16 years.

**SS:** *Wow!*

**LL:** Three times as chairperson. Sixteen years.

**SS:** *And how many races was that, a four year term each time?*

**LL:** Mmm, hmm yeah.

**SS:** *That's a long time.*

**LL:** Yes, it was. It just came upon us. Well you get tired of marathon meetings, uh, in those days we go to meetings sometime at 7:00 to 12:00, maybe 1:00 or 2:00 o'clock. We couldn't get them to uh, well a small minority tried to get them, to meet in the afternoon, but no meeting in the afternoon.

**SS:** *What was the rationale? What is the rationale for wanting to do everything at night?*

**LL:** Well, there were some who had businesses. They could not or would not, but now they meet in the afternoon, one at night and one in the afternoon. Cause there's different composition now. Mostly women. I think there are three men and the rest are women. Different board altogether. But we had a very good superintendent, Dr. Shelton. He was a...no resentment at all. We met together, we had dinner together, no problem.

**SS:** *How do you think the schools are headed these days? What's your opinion of the school system right now?*

**LL:** It is not what it used to be. I think they've made some advances. Some improvement, but they still got a long way to go. The crowded conditions, underpaid teachers, um, I don't think they're on double session this year, but the portables. Uh, teachers have a heavy, heavy load. They've got to discipline and they're limited as to

what they could do there, plus they get to teach. So some are gonna get left behind. The slow ones, the slow learners are gonna get left. Those who are more apt will move ahead more rapidly. So I'd like to see the slow learners have an opportunity to uh, try to catch up and they will, given enough um, time by the teacher. Teachers take more time with them, but uh, I think they're trying, they're trying, but uh, it's just rough.

**SS:** *What's uh, your assessment of uh, the busing situation? Do you prefer neighborhood schools for children? Can you, can you address that issue?*

**LL:** The, the what?

**SS:** *Whether children should go to their neighborhood schools no matter of....*

**LL:** I think so, I think so, I, it would give them a little more identification. Uh, the neighborhood is um, ....uh, I think it would be good for them to go to neighborhood schools, if they can. Uh, they have more identification with the neighborhood. Then, on the other hand, getting out to know those in other areas is good, but I think the neighborhood, because uh, they are all looking for the same thing.

**SS:** *You're not concerned about the cultural isolation on rich and poor?*

**LL:** Well, well that's what I said uh, it is uh, getting out to know others. And uh, let me put it this way. While they are in the more formative stages, the neighborhood schools would be better and when they get a little older then to spread out would be a very good thing. I think the exchange of ideas or culture and so forth can be better able to decipher, to interpret than they are when they are younger. I think they've uh, but it would be a good thing, the diversity of culture and understanding.

I think if they ever get to understand each other, they would be even better, even better. [ clock chimes ]

**SS:** *A big bong.*

**LL:** Yeah.

**SS:** *Does, is Tampa unique, you think, that understanding or the ability to work out the problems in the 50's and early 60s?*

**LL:** I have certainly given that a great deal of thought, that we were unique, uh, we are unique. In that, we feel that we didn't need those on the outside to come in and tell us how. That we had sense enough to think through our problems and to look at them and come to a conclusion, that we would be objective enough to recognize that here is a problem. Why wait somebody on the outside to come in when we have been blessed with God-given ability to think through the problem, if we would just open our minds and think through the problems, we could find solutions and we did.

**SS:** *Did it take uh, external things like the Brown decision to, to, to convince the community that there was a problem?*

**LL:** That might have helped. Might have helped to give some impetus to it. But uh, I'd like to think that we were capable on our own of thinking through the problems. We saw that there was a problem. And I think the recognition of perhaps history for too long has given uh, into the idea that the separate but equal and it may be the Brown decision helped bring us to the point. Maybe it helped bring us to the point where we could see that it was not fair, that you would give old books, old football uniforms, and so forth. And you had men going way to Germany, well say, to Europe, fighting for democracy, and here at home, you

did not have a fair share, a fair shake, that the playing field was not level. And we need to do some leveling of the playing field.

**SS:** *How level do you think the playing field is now?*

**LL:** Much better, much better, much better. I would not want to come to Tampa as I came in '56 and found it the way it was. It, it really couldn't be. If I hadn't, somebody else would have, but uh, it happened to be my turn and so it worked out well. I think there is a God-given reason for my coming to Tampa. I could have gone to Virginia. I could have remained in Georgia at Morehouse, teaching school. I never would have become a part of the change that occurred and so I think it's providential that it was just my time, just my time.

**SS:** *That's a good place to stop. That was very wonderful. Thank you.*

[END OF TAPE]