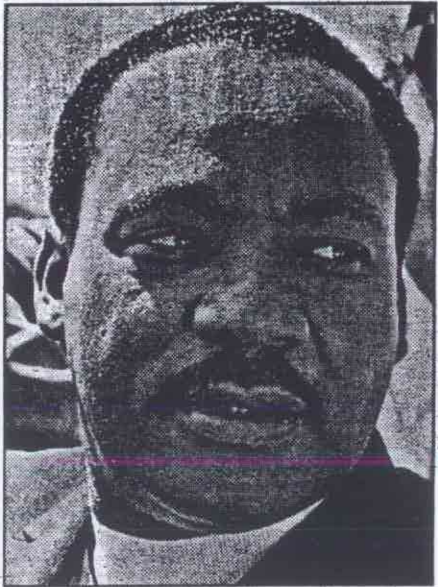
25 YEARS AFTER MEMPHIS



Still Seeking The Dream

Specter of racial violence haunting city again

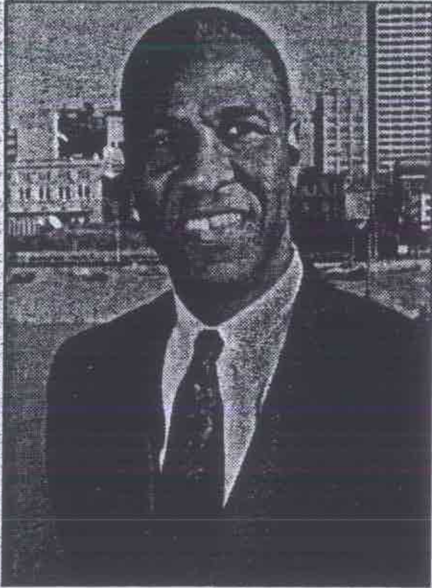
By Nina Bernstein
STAFF CORRESPONDENT

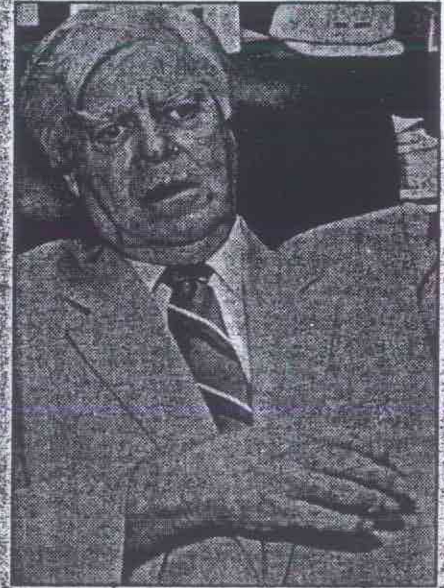
Memphis

Twenty-five years ago, Willie Herenton stood outside City Hall in this Mississippi River crossroads of American race relations, one of thousands of blacks who had rallied to support the most downtrodden among them.

He was an elementary school principal but, like Martin Luther King Jr. himself, Herenton had answered the call of 1,300 striking city garbage workers — most uneducated men in ill-fitting, hand-me-down clothes, with a full-time wage so low they qualified for welfare and job conditions so cruel as to crush the body and sear the soul.

As so many who marched in Memphis in that hopeful winter and bittersweet spring of 1968, Herenton wore a sign across his chest. "I Am a Man," the signs cried, laying claim to the human dignity denied the unionizing black sanitation workers by an intransigent mayor, Henry Loeb, and denied all blacks by the social and economic





Photos by John L. Focht

Mayor Willie Herenton, left, and former mayor Wyeth Chandler

order Loeb seemed to represent.

Now, marveled Herenton, leading a visitor through a "Hall of Mayors" hung with portrait after portrait of white, mustachioed Southern gentlemen, he himself is mayor of the city where King was killed 25 years ago today.

"It suddenly dawned on me," he said one day last week in describing the epiphany he experienced in his wood-paneled office recently when he screened "At the River I Stand," a new documentary about the strike. "There's Henry Loeb in his office, recalcitrant as he was against us. And it hits me: It's the same paneling, the same room I'm in. Here it is 1993, and I'm sitting in that very office as mayor."

But as with so much else in Memphis, a city still as racially polarized as any in America, the 1991 election of the city's first black mayor by a 142-vote margin means both more and less than meets the eye of the beholder.

"What it means is everybody's moved out of Memphis," said Wyeth Chandler, whose portrait, along with his father's, hangs in the "Hall of Mayors" among predecessors who grew rich as cotton merchants when cotton was king and blacks were its serfs.

Now a circuit court judge, Chandler has such black judicial colleagues as D'Army Bailey, a Jaguar-driving Yale Law School graduate who grew up in Memphis as the son of a maid and a Pullman railroad porter, and who led the drive that created the National Civil Rights Museum out of the Lorraine Hotel, where King was shot.

But like many white Memphians in this city of 650,000, where the black population has gone from 40 percent to about 55 percent in the last two decades, Chandler, 63, hasn't changed his view of the 1968 strike.

"It was a labor matter that had nothing to do with race," insisted Chandler, a city councilman at the time who strongly backed Loeb. He still speaks with outrage of the "Italian from New Jersey" sent from the union, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, after the workers walked out on their own, spurred by the death of two workers who were crushed to death in the maw of a garbage truck compressor.

"We had just as much interest, if not more, in the welfare of our employees than King or the union," Chandler said.

It was such stubborn Old South paternalism, the documentary shows, that turned a walkout by men without redress into a turning point in the civil rights movement.

"Memphis was the personification of the Poor People's Campaign," observed Steven Ross, a Memphis State University professor who co-produced "At the River I Stand." The documentary gives heroic stature to the workers whose struggle embodied the new direction King was seeking: An interracial coalition that could force recognition of economic inequity.

"The nation has to see and hear its working poor — that's what the Poor People's Campaign was all about," added Ross, who grew up in a working-class neighborhood in Elmont on Long Island. "Memphis was the last gasp of the civil rights movement — or a transition that ran into a brick wall."

Here, as in the nation as a whole, the income gap between black and white households has widened since King raised his prophet's voice in a Memphis thunderstorm to share the premonition of his own death and the mountaintop vision of his people's deliverance.

In no other major metropolitan area is the disparity more stark than in this cradle of the blues: Black family income in the city was only 47 percent of median white income in 1990, compared to a black family income that was nearly 62 percent of the white median nationally.

With its renovation of the Beale Street of blues fame, its highway rechristened for Elvis Presley and a new $62 million Pyramid sports arena that plays on fancied parallels with the Egyptian city after which it was named, Memphis successfully promotes a domesticated version of black culture. But a short walk from the touristy downtown, the colorful barbecue blues joints give way to abandoned houses, scrap-metal yards and the dilapidated housing of the poor.

A quarter century after King's assassination triggered eruptions of arson and looting in the black neighborhoods of cities across America, and a year after the Los Angeles riot that followed the first Rodney King verdict, the specter of racial violence haunts the city again. Racial hostility over the retrial of black Memphis Congressman Harold Ford by a nearly all-white, rural-county jury threatens to escalate into explosive street protests if Ford is convicted of federal bank fraud and conspiracy charges. The controversy has deepened divisions in a black community far more splintered by class and political turf than the one that rallied around the sanitation workers.

"Under no circumstances will civil

James Earl Ray

Martin Luther King Jr. Inside, a 24-Page Special Section

'After you've been asked the question a thousand times, it becomes humiliating to have to answer it again. But, no, I did not kill Martin Luther King.'

—An Interview with James Earl Ray

Inside Sports: After the Dream

disobedience be tolerated in our city," Herenton, the former King foot soldier, declared in a statement released Feb. 25, when an outcry by black activists over jury selection in the Ford case frightened downtown corporate interests. Herenton, forced to resign as school superintendent two years ago after he was involved in a sex-for-promotion scandal, won the mayoralty with Ford's backing.

Last month Herenton publicly rebuked a black minister, legendary for his association with King. The minister, the Rev. S.W. (Billy) Kyles, proposed a boycott and petition drive against the city's application for a professional football franchise, long the holy grail of white Memphis businessmen. Kyles had argued that the treatment of Ford, an Adam Clayton Powell-like figure widely seen as the black community's premier power broker, showed the city was too racially polarized to deserve the franchise.

"Sure there's racism and polarization, but compared to where?" said

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