

## Synopsis of Charles Walker Interview

Charles Walker, owner of "K Street Auto Parts", has lived and worked in the Hilltop Area of Tacoma, Washington for the past thirty years. As an active and respected member of the business community, he has witnessed the changes that have impacted this area.

Mr. Walker's life and his views come from his military experience as well as that of a Black business owner in a part of town that has a reputation it continually strives to overcome. Active in civic groups and social clubs, Mr. Walker has kept a pulse on a community that steadfastly refuses to give up. His memories reveal what it takes to survive in an area that seems to have more going against it than for it.

Mr. Walker contributes his success in business to the ideal that one needs to return to the community a portion of what one receives from it. This combined with Mr. Walker's belief that hard work mixed with fair treatment of others demonstrates to the reader what it takes to survive in this world of racism and economic exploitation.

This interview illustrates that even with a sometimes ambivalent history, there is a strong sense of pride in the Hilltop Area. From gangs and drugs to social change and community activism, the

From gangs and drugs to social change and community activism, the Hilltop area has risen and fallen, yet still exists. Although people may come and go and the colors of their skin may not be the same, residents of this area have a rich and meaningful tradition of working together to survive.

CHARLES WALKER INTERVIEW

By Michelle Treat

June 7, 1991

Good morning ladies. And how are you this morning? Well, you want me to start with my life I suppose? This is Walkers life! I was born in Lexington, South Carolina a hundred years ago (chuckle). When I was three months my mother and father migrated into New York, so I actually grew up in New York. That was in Harlem if anyone is familiar with New York. The jungle, in other words, and basically, it wasn't easy. In those days we had the gangs. Different from the gangs today, but gangs. To survive you had to be in a gang, otherwise you didn't survive in Harlem in those days.

So I grew up rather rough. My father, he was a stevedore, which was on the waterfront. He was one of those tough people. He believed in being a rough, tumble and go for yourself type of person. He instilled in me at a young age that in order to survive, you got to protect yourself. So I grew up with the understanding that you have to be independent to survive, in order to survive, I should say.

At seventeen, I was in a little bit of trouble, so I had to get out of town. I joined the army in order for someplace to go. I had never been out of Harlem in my seventeen years, so I didn't really know anything about the world other than the streets of Harlem. So I went into the army and handled basic training and what not, and I advanced rather fast. I was a Master Sergeant after nine months, believe it or not, and that was in 1947. And needless to say, I travelled all over the world.

I went to Alaska in 1949 and I was stationed up there, up north in Big Delta. We were testing cold arctic equipment and I got caught in a blizzard and I froze. I stayed in Walter Reed Hospital two years and they said that I was never going to be any good anymore and that they wanted to discharge me. I refused to go, so I stayed in the army twenty-two years.

Before I retired I found a service station that was vacant. I was looking forward to retirement, so I opened the service station to run part time. It turned out that it became not only part time, but more than I could handle, so I ended up having six people working for me in less than a year and a half. I was still in the service. I had the station five years before I retired actually. And I had two when I retired. I had a full time army career until I made "Dealer of the Year", and the colonel saw it on the front pages of the local paper, and he told me "Sarge, I think it is time for you to retire".

Needless to say I retired, and devoted the rest of my time running my stations, which I ran for twenty eight years before Ecology came along and said that I had to update \$200,000 worth of repairs. Needless to say, \$200,000 was not quite what I had in mind. So, I came over here and ran my parts store which I had owned (for) twelve years before I sold the station. Someone else had been operating it for me (during this time). I was just, you know, an absentee owner, I guess you might say.

After I closed the station, I devoted my time in here until my eyesight went bad. I couldn't see any farther, so I had to get out of here. I sold (the station) to another guy, who turned out to be not only blinder than I was, but a bum. So after eight months, I had to return from retirement, and take it back, repossess it or whatever word you want to use.

Getting on to this area, thirty years on the corner of 15th and K, has been an experience in itself. I found that you had to have some type of mean background in order to survive. It wasn't the easiest corner, and anyone that has any knowledge of Tacoma will tell you that 15th and K is still notorious to a degree. But fortunately I have never had a problem.

I've always tried to treat everybody fair, you know. Whatever their background was, I got along rather well with people. Out of my thirty years, and of all the robberies around here, I've never been robbed, not once. Had a thousand break-ins, but never confronted as a robbery.

But the area I've seen change, oh, dramatically. When I opened the station in '61, let me back up, when I came to Tacoma in '50, my wife and I and one child and we lived in the Hilltop area. We were living over on 12th and M, which is now the senior citizen building. We lived there for two years until I could buy a home, and then we lived at 12th and L. Then we lived at 14th and between

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L and M, and then I bought a home up on 23rd and Cushman. We lived there sixteen years. In the meantime, I was running the station before I retired from the service.

I went to Korea in 1953 and I was back in Korea in '61, so I had two tours of service in Korea plus Germany. Getting back to the area, when we moved into this area, a black face was rather rare. It was predominantly at that time Italians. I'll tell you a little story. My wife and I were sitting in the living room one day and she jumped up and started screaming. I said "What's wrong, have you gone nuts?" She said "I just saw a black face go down the street!". It was that rare.

We had a community house in the area, at that time, that was run predominantly by Italians, and a lot of Swedish people were here. My wife was very active in that, in fact, my kids grew up in that. It was strictly community things that they had, homemaking and all that. In those days they were working with children very strongly. That was the area in '53 to '58.

Then the Blacks started moving in much heavier. The area became predominant black. From '58 to the mid 60's, it got real bad, real bad. Robberies, we didn't have drug problems, but we did have a lot of robberies, stealing and what not, and killings. Then it turned again, and went back predominant white, believe it or not.

The Blacks moved out and we were getting back into normal times and the streets got safe again. People were moving, similar to what it is today. We had a little so-called riot back then, 1968. They call it the "Mother's Day Riot", or something to that effect. But it really wasn't a riot. It was just a bunch of kids running up and down the street, breaking out a few windows, but that made us famous in Tacoma for a while.

Also in '68 we had a "Now, Mr. Lincoln" Program. What the "Now, Mr. Lincoln" Program was all about was we were raising seed money in order to put minority businesses in, to fund them so that they would have the seed money to go with the SBA (Small Business Association) to get funding for new businesses. A very successful affair, we raised approximately \$32,000 in one night. It was a city wide affair. We got very good support. Out of that \$32,000 we put twenty-nine minorities in business. And out of the twenty-nine within a year and a half, they were all gone. Not one survived. That was sad, a poor track record in other words.

But to be blunt with you, we didn't know what we was doing. We were new to that type of thing. We didn't secure the loans and we didn't follow through on the loans, but it was a learning experience. And out of that "Mr. Lincoln" came the Black Businessmen's Association which we had approximately 139 members when we closed down, which was in 1975. But we stayed on the records in Olympia until 1984, when I took it off the rolls of the

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organization. We had a nice club house where we had everybody from the mayor to the top bankers coming in there for lunch, eating Kentucky Fried on couches. We really had a nice thing going there.

Unfortunately, in 1975, the building was burned down, well actually it was blown up. They actually blew it up, we don't know to the day who did it, but that was the downfall of the Association. We never could get the members interested again to really function.

Organizations I have belonged to...oh God everything. I was a founder of the Cavilero Men's Social Club, a private club, which is now a thriving organization with approximately 300 members now. The NAACP, I'm a member still, and a board member of the Urban League. I've been a board member for twenty years, I just got off of that board last year. They gave me my twenty year pin, and when I retired from here they gave me a blast out at the Sheridan, which was nice, I appreciated it.

And then I thought I had sold the business, but it didn't work out so I had to come out of retirement and come back to work. What am I missing ladies, you need to help me a little bit, what haven't I touched on, what do you want to know?

**How did membership in the Urban League affect you in your business?**

Exposure. I was the Nominating Chairman, believe it or not, for my whole twenty years on the board, and I got to meet an awful lot of people. See we wanted execs, everybody, anybody, to put on the board. And I had to go and make contact with these people to see if they would serve, etc, etc. and that gave me a lot of exposure which in the meantime helped me in my business. They became customers, you know.

**Why did you decide to leave the Urban League?**

Well I was tired. Twenty years is twenty years.

**What is your perception of the Black business community today, as it exists, and what do you think has led to the changes that have taken place?**

Well I think that this particular area for black businesses is a wonderful opportunity as of right now to get in on the ground floor. I have a feeling that within the next five years, this is going to be the most thriving community in the city, due to location, due to the input that they are putting into it as of now, and the grant money they are getting up here. They have great plans for this area. And if a person don't seek it out, then they are gonna miss the boat.

The only thing that I think is that if a Black enterprise person wanted to get in here on the ground floor, right now, they need some training. I found that over the years that the problem with the Black businessman and woman, is the fact that they go in blind. They have no knowledge of what they are doing. Funding-- they have no idea that you can't take a thousand dollars and expect to open a business, it just doesn't work.

You gotta have the right capital, and you gotta have the right location. I feel that is what the Black Businessman's Association was all about, to try and help people to achieve those things before they went in and laid their dollars down and in six months they had to walk away and their entire investment was gone. So that is the basic thing I think we really need back into this area, someone who can give these people that expertise into going into business. Otherwise it is just a waste of money, and you know, no one has any money to throw away.

Secondly, I feel that if a person don't look into this and find the right location, and find the product that is needed in the area, you know, everything isn't needed in an area. This is a low income area, and still is, and you can't come in here selling \$7,000.00 products when the peoples pocketbooks are only \$29.95 . You got to have the product that a person can afford. If you come in here marketing the wrong product you are not going to survive, and

people are not coming into this area yet to buy. They still think that this area is taboo, the dreaded area, which is untrue, but that what's out there.

The media doesn't help. If someone get knocked down, it doesn't matter how they got knocked down, they are gonna put it on the front page you know, "On K Street, the Hilltop". That is the bad image that we have got to live down. We need some good PR to come out of here.

If I was to go into business now, I would first try to figure out what product the area needs, and there are a lot of needs in this area that are not here. But I would definitely choose this area, I really would. I really think that this is a good area, and I think that in five years this will be the prime location. I don't have any problem with Blacks getting into business, but they need to do their homework before they start trying to figure it out, that's my only belief.

**What role do you feel that Black Businesses play in the Black Community?**

That's a toughy. The only reason that I say it is a toughy is out of the track record of thirty years, we only have approximately five survivors that their kids could say "you made it". I can only speak for myself, but I get a lot of respect which over the

years I've almost had to demand. You know, they don't just give it to you without a little bit of demand. You gotta let them know that you are here for their benefit, and that you are here to try to help them, and that you are here to try and serve them, but at the same time you don't want any problems, if that makes any sense!

Kids today that are out there on the street are unfortunately hooked in all this mess. In the mornings when I come in and the nights when I am leaving, I always get a "Mister this" and a "Mister that" and "How are you today", and "What can we do to help you" etc. Even though I know that they can't (help), it is nice to hear. I've known them since...and now they are...they grew up with me. You gotta get their respect first. You have to get their respect in order for them to respect you. The guy that I unfortunately sold the business to for eight months, he didn't have their respect and unfortunately they hurt him, they definitely hurt him. You can't get hurt if you want to have them on your side.

I read that you would give credit to people who didn't have the money even though it wasn't authorized by Exxon. What has been your relationship with the people that live in this area?

Well I go back to the same thing that I said before, you cannot live in this community alone. I know the community, and I know it is a low income community. I know people mean well, but they just

don't have the funds. They don't make the money that is required to carry on a household. An old junker in this area is a person's livelihood.

When I left here I had four boxes full of promissory notes--two dollars worth of gas, five dollars worth of gas, twenty-nine dollars worth of repairs. But I felt as though I was part of the community, so I owed the community. The station was good to me, I'll be honest with you. It let me raise three kids. I lived a fairly comfortable life, and without the community I couldn't have done that. So I felt that I couldn't take and not give, and I did it with an open heart. I felt as though the people deserved a break, and I was basically the only service center in the area for quite a few years, and they really didn't have any place else to go.

I was had, I'm not saying that it was all just out of the kindness of my heart, I was had. I was had good. If I had the money that I gave away I'd probably not be sitting here, not talking to you, I'd be in Bermuda somewhere! My bookkeeper estimated that I gave away about \$300,000 over the years. But I don't regret it by any means, I'd do it all over again. Unfortunately in a parts store you can't be that generous, but in a station you had a little bit more flexibility. Here my giving days are over!

**What led you to stay on the Hill through all of your successes?**

Community need. Like I said, if I had closed the station ten years ago, it really would have been a disaster for the area. So that was, like I said, basically the only outlet. Then we had another Black guy come along, Baldwin's Tire and Brake. He's been in business now approximately eighteen years. He is about the only outlet left now, except I am going to try and run a repair out of here now for people. Hopefully, I can do it on a limited basis, on emergencies and what not. We are gonna try and service them best we can. But that was basically the reason. There was a need--the area definitely needed it. They still need it, in fact we have people coming in here everyday saying "When you gonna open your station again?". Never, you know--that's gone. But I miss it, I really do. I was very reluctant in closing it, but due to the financial condition I didn't have any choice. I was forced out in other words. Otherwise, I'd still be there.

**What kinds of activities are going on in this area now to bring back businesses, improve safety and to give a more positive image of the Hilltop area?**

I find that today we have more community input. The people in general, themselves, are getting more pride within the area. They are getting out there now and saying "Hey, we want our safe streets back". We have a lot of programs now that are also putting in

input, Safestreets, for example. They are forming community leadership type things to develop the people, into bringing out a good neighborhood, in other words. And it is working. It's really working. Since I've been back I've seen people walking up and down the street, and a year ago you didn't see people walking these streets. The only ones you saw were the ones you didn't want to see walking the streets. But now it's the general public beginning to come out. The upper end of K Street now is beautiful, it is really clean. Fifteen South... it is still hairy.

Police are trying to do a good job, but they move them off of this corner and they move them on to another corner, and then they catch up with them on that corner and they move them back to this corner. They are trying, and they are doing a good job, I have to give them credit.

Daytime has usually been fairly safe, but now is it beautiful, but they still come out at night. Every morning when I come in I have to spend twenty minutes cleaning up the front, but that is better than when they were standing out there all day. It used to be twenty of them standing out in front of my door, not in my entrance, but across the front of the building, and you know that was ugly. I had to say "Hey, move on here", and they would respect me and move on, but in five minutes they would be back again. You know it was a full time job. But now we don't have that. Well,

there is still a little bit of it, but nothing that compares to what it was a year ago.

They are making quite an improvement in here, yeah, and I still think that it is the community leadership that is actually doing it, the people themselves. They are not depending on the police department alone to try and do the job, which is wonderful I think.

**How would you describe the ethnic make-up of the Hilltop now?**

I think that it is a general mixture now. We have the Cambodian population that has really increased in the area. Blacks are still heavy, but whites are also moving back into the area now. Cheap rents, cheap overhead, cheap everything in this area. Property is cheap, but you can't really find it now, they are buying it up as fast as it comes. But I would say, it is a general mixture now, it is not predominant anything. I really don't think so. I think that we have a good strong mixture of all races, and they seem to be getting along.

**In the sixties many Blacks came to the Hilltop because they couldn't find housing in other parts of Tacoma, and were pushed to this area. Did you experience this?**

I've experienced racism, if that is the question. In fact it is still here today. Fortunately, I've never, well I can't say that

I've never had it, but I demanded more or less respect. You know "What do you want? You want to buy my product, I appreciate it". In fact at one time my business was 70:30 white. And all came, I felt, from service. I treated everyone alike. When we had our so called gas shortage, I sold gas everyday, for two hours, first come first served. I didn't have any favoritism. Whomever got in line for two hours, they got gas, So that helped me a lot. People said "Hey man, you've been fair". And they continued coming after the gas shortage was over, which helped me to survive even more so for that much longer. But it is definitely here.

Housing, I can't recall ever being where you couldn't live where you wanted to if you had the money. Unfortunately, if you didn't have the money you couldn't rent. You couldn't live in a two hundred dollar neighborhood, for example, when the Hilltop was forty. You went where your money would let you go. And it still exists today. If you don't have the six hundred dollars for rent, you can come up here and look for one for a hundred and ninety-five. It is basically the same thing. There was discrimination, I'm not saying that there wasn't, but if you had the money you didn't have problems. Like I said, they landed where the money would let them land.

I'm not talking it down, it (racism) definitely exists, and I am not saying that there wasn't places in Tacoma that wouldn't rent

to you. The biggest ones that I heard of were the mixed marriages cases, there was a lot of racism in that, back in the old days.

**How has racism changed in the last thirty years?**

Like I said, it still exists, but people are not as open now as they once were with calling people names, and etc. They still do it, but I think that now they do so more behind closed doors, not out in the open like in the old days, even ten years ago. I think it is much more behind the scenes now than it is out in the open. They would say, "Hey, you are a no good so and so", you know, and I don't think they use those words anymore as openly as they used to.

But going back to when we had the "Now, Mr. Lincoln" that was in '69, we had more private homes giving parties, white, than we did black throughout the city. We were going into white homes. They opened their homes up having little cocktail parties , whatever, that one night. I personally went into approximately fifty homes that one night, and ninety percent of them were white, that were contributing to the cause. I'm not saying that blacks didn't wish to, but they just didn't have the means to do it. So I would say the city was open back in '69, to try and help minorities to get off the ground. But we did have a good program.

**What do you personally consider your greatest accomplishment?**

Survival. My survival really was my greatest accomplishment. In this particular area, to survive thirty years, that is quite an accomplishment and I am told that every day! You know, "How did you do it?" and "Hey what's your secret?" And its just like I told you at the beginning, treating people fair. If you treat people fair, I think in turn they will treat you fair. But I (also) think that my twenty years in the service was an accomplishment, it taught me a lot. I learned world travel, which I never would of on my own. The army was very educational. I think that it also attributed to my staying in business for that length of time. Thirty-one years, especially for a small business, is an accomplishment for anybody these days. And when I went in it was even tougher, believe me.

**Is there anything else in your earlier life that made you determined to make it as an independent business person?**

Yes, my father. My father taught me at an early age to be independent and that you gotta be tough in order to survive in this life. I didn't used to like my old man. I thought he was the worst person in the world. But in my growing years, I found that he one of the greatest men that I have ever known.

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I think that the greatest person who had an influence on my life, and this is going back to Harlem, back in my young days, was Adam Clayton Powell. I attended his church, actually I grew up in his church, what little bit I did go. I went only because my mom made me go, but he was an influence on my life. Adam Clayton Powell did some of the greatest things I ever saw a man at that time, a black man, achieve. He was outspoken, he was a leader. He had a membership at that time of over 4,000 people, and in those days to have a congregation of over 4,000 people... that was a sizeable following. He stood on the corners of Harlem, on soap boxes. He talked in the cold, and in the sleet, and the rain in order to get where he went. He ended up as you well know, as a congressman out of New York, the first Black. He was really an idol of mine, and I followed him throughout his lifespan, in the end it wasn't too good, but he was human.

But I think my old man, when he stressed to me, you got to be independent, you got to fight for survival, I think that helped me, I really do. And I still believe that today. The world doesn't owe you a living, in other words, you got to earn it.

**What was your greatest threat to survival over the years on the Hilltop?**

Economy died real bad in here in the late sixties. Funding was non-existent, and in order to survive then you had to just scratch.

I almost went under, three or four times over the years. And lets face it, I was giving away too much. I was putting all of it on the books to try and survive, and I ended up not getting any of it back. That was a hard lesson to learn-- give-- but you got to have a limit. So I would say it was my own personal downfall, that I actually got too lenient. I was giving more than I was receiving in other words, and I almost went under a couple of times doing that. But it was a lesson I learned the hard way, but fortunately I was able to overcome it. I would recommend anytime you are in business you can't give away more than you are taking in, it just doesn't work.

**What about the other businesses in that period that didn't make it?**

There were a lot of them, that didn't make it. Going back to funding, they opened their doors and didn't know what they were doing. They didn't have enough funding in order to carry them over the hump. When you open a new business people don't just start flocking through the doors spending money. You got to have a cushion to carry you until you can get it up and going. And most of them just didn't have it, even the ones that we gave the seed money to. They were being funded properly through SBA and they would go back for more and SBA would say "No way!". So they would sit and wait until they had to lock the doors. Funding is basic business anyway you look at it. If you don't have the proper funding to overcome the hardships of the business you just don't

make it. Like coming back in here now, I got to start from scratch, I've got to rebuild it. If I don't have enough to carry me through, I am in trouble. But fortunately, I hope I have enough savvy to work myself to rebuild it.

The guy that was here for eight months ran away eighty percent of the customers. This was due to the fact that he didn't know what he was doing, and due to the fact that he didn't have what he needed to sell. When they came through the door, he just sold off what I (had) left here and didn't replace it. So now I've got to fill all of the gaps.

**What years were the roughest times up here for businesses?**

The sixties were bad, and the late seventies were also a real hard time in the area. The economy got real bad. That's when a lot of businesses here on K Street, the thriving ones, moved. They saw it coming. You used to be able to find anything you wanted on K Street-- furniture stores, grocery stores-- we had practically anything you needed-- shoe stores-- everything was here. We had nice drug stores in those days. They are all gone. We need to bring them back.

**What do you think is the major element keeping this community from coming back?**

P.R.! It is bad. People out there now, you say, "My business is on K Street" and they say "Well I'm not coming up there, I'm not coming". We have a body shop right up the street, he is the best body shop in Tacoma, but when people call and he tells them where he is located, they say "No way, I am sorry but I'm not coming down there". That is from the P.R. coming out of the newspapers and what not. They give it that bad image. Even though it is far from the truth. People are under the illusion that it is bad up here, that people are driving (around) and shooting windows out , and you know, that's not true. But to me, the image now in the area has been tainted throughout the media. In fact they are still doing it. You read everyday, you read (in) the paper, "Shooting on 15th and L", "Shooting on 19th". There are shootings all over the city, but they don't put that in the paper. If they do, it is way on the back page where you never even get to reading. I would say that we need more good P.R. coming out of the area about the good things that are going on.

**What businesses along K Street have been around for many years?**

We have some old businesses on this street. We've got Helen Richards Insurance, she's got over thirty-five years. Paulson's on 11th and K has got in forty years, and Brown's Candy, Johnson's Candy, Johnson-Brown, whatever, he's (been there) forty something years. We got some old businesses that are still hanging on, but we can count them now. Only about six, I would say that are left.

**How many businesses were here during the peak?**

The K street Boosters, which is the oldest organization in the city of Tacoma, and is still on record as an organization, had a membership at one time of 137 that I recall. I was vice president once, but that was a hundred years ago. We had a membership of 137 at one time, and that was in the surrounding area of approximately ten blocks. We wouldn't take anyone in if they weren't a business within the so called K Street Booster district at that time. I would say we had a good 50-75 thriving businesses. Not black businesses, general. At the height there was probably five or six black businesses, percentage wise about one percent. There wasn't too many black businesses.

**When were black businesses at their peak?**

If you took in the taverns, we would peak out at about twelve-fourteen at one time. It was in the mid-seventies that they started building somewhat. But I don't think we ever had over ten or fifteen and that's including taverns and beauty parlors and barber shops. Those were the biggest thriving black businesses. We had several beauty parlors and several barber shops and two or three owned black taverns.

But legitimate businesses, I guess you might call beauty shops legitimate business, or a tavern a legitimate business. But I

mean, I guess what I am trying to say is that shoe stores or something like that, no we didn't have ownership, no.

Well I have to admire you ladies for coming out and trying to give us a nice history. It wasn't all ugly. I hope that whatever I had to contribute will benefit something.