

A truth revealed: Jury in Rodney King beating trial not all-white; man says his father was black

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SQUAW VALLEY — Juror No. 8 from the Rodney King beating trial has always heard the 12-member panel described as either all white or as having no blacks.

Now, he wants the public to know that's not the whole story: His father was a black man.

"Nobody's ever guessed that I was black," Henry King Jr. told Scripps Newspapers.

From the get-go, the media made a big thing about the jury having no blacks, said King, a 69-year-old retiree living in Fresno County.

"It made you feel like they didn't think we could come out with a fair verdict because we were supposed to be an all-white jury," he said.

It's long been reported that 10 jurors were white, one was Hispanic and another was Filipino. The U.S. Census Bureau considers Hispanic a designation of ethnicity, not race, and the jury and the four Los Angeles Police Department officers on trial — one of them Hispanic — have often been referred to simply as white.

"If they didn't like our decision, then let it be based on just that: They didn't like it — not that we were a bunch of white people that wanted to let the white cops off," King said. "That wasn't the case."

He still believes the verdict was correct, based on testimony about what happened before the beating captured by the videotape and what police were allowed to do when subduing someone.

But it has eaten at him over the years to hear there was no black perspective on the panel.

"I had both sides," said King, no relation to Rodney King.

He has heard a lot of jokes about black people from whites during his life. "I didn't feel anything like that during the trial," he said.

King said he's close to black relatives on his father's side, many living in the Los Angeles area.

"After the verdict, I had to face that part of my family," he said. "Some were supportive, and some weren't. It was something I had to face besides everything else."

His mother, who was white, was the most critical.

"How could you, Junior?" he recalls her saying.

'I look pretty white'

The Ventura County Star contacted King as part of an effort to find the jurors whose 1992 verdict sparked days of deadly rioting in Los Angeles.

At first, King didn't want his name used.

"There are a few things about me that people don't know," he initially said, then choked back tears before saying his father was black.

It's something he didn't share with other jurors during the trial and doesn't recall sharing when they occasionally socialized afterward. Nor had he talked about it with a reporter.

"Forty years ago, you really didn't say that you were part black," said King. "Now, I'm proud of it."

When he applied last year to be on the Fresno County Grand Jury, one of the first things he told them was that his father was black.

"They thought I was joking," he said.

During interviews on the phone and at his home on 5 acres in the southern Sierra Nevada foothills, King shared family photos and thoughts on his background and the trial. Both of his parents have since died.

"I look pretty white," said King, whose friends call him Hank. "If you looked at me, you wouldn't know I had black blood in me."

His eyes are blue; his skin is light.

King variously described himself as part black, as having black blood and occasionally as black or mixed-race.

"I don't know if you would say mulatto or what," he said at one point.

In his younger years, he didn't often think about his racial background.

His father, Henry King Sr., had left the family by the time he was in kindergarten. He grew up mostly in Tulare, a small farming community in the San Joaquin Valley.

Once, in elementary school, some other students called him a "n-----," but he didn't understand the term, and his mother never explained what it meant. When his father later remarried his first wife, a black woman, young Henry marveled at what he thought was her deep tan.

The name-callers knew his family, which has a rich history in Tulare. His great-grandparents started King's Cafe there in 1927, according to a local history of African-Americans known as the Edna Wade Project. His grandparents, Arthur and Grace King, later owned the cafe, where Henry sometimes ate as a child before it closed in 1956. Even after his father left, he was raised in a house owned by his grandmother Grace, who took him and his sister on a memorable train trip to Los Angeles, among other outings.

King wasn't close to his father. He wasn't close to his stepfather either, although he went by the man's last name during high school. An uncle on his mother's side was more of a father figure, taking him on hunting and fishing trips.

King always knew his dad had served in the Army during World War II. But it was much later he learned his father, who was stationed in France and drove a supply truck, had served in an all-black unit.

"I didn't know that about my father," King said, "that he was in an all-black, segregated unit. It still gets to me."

Trial takes toll

In 1992, King was living in Santa Paula and working as a senior splicer for Southern California Edison, which required him to work on high-voltage lines atop poles or inside vaults.

He remembers being at work, sitting out in the test shack where he'd evaluate transformers before they went up on poles, when he got a call from jury services. He had received a summons, but they wanted him to report to the courthouse in Simi Valley instead of Ventura.

"I thought, 'Boy, that's different,' " said King, who has served on numerous juries. He didn't know until he got there what it was about.

Like millions of others, he'd seen the videotape of Rodney King's beating on television and thought the police officers were guilty.

The jury questionnaire was more than 40 pages long. King didn't think he'd be chosen. He listed his membership in the National Rifle Association, for one thing, and said positive things about police.

He doesn't remember answering information on the questionnaire about race. But at that time, he said, he probably would have simply put white.

Although some potential jurors were grilled by lawyers, King remembers being asked only a few perfunctory questions about whether he'd be fair before he was picked.

The long trial — about a month of testimony and a week of sequestration during deliberations — took a tremendous emotional toll on some jurors. Afterward, many reported getting hate mail and death threats. The then-Star-Free Press was highly criticized at the time for publishing the names of the jurors. A few weeks later, one Ojai juror told The New York Times her life was "beyond hell."

At least four of the 12 jurors have died, records show. Of those, two whose families placed obituaries in The Star didn't mention their jury service on the historic trial. Other jurors recently declined to share their stories with The Star. Not all could be located.

The riots, injuries and deaths that followed the verdict still bother King.

"That's pretty tough, even though you thought you did the right thing," he said.

After the Simi Valley verdict, Henry and his wife, Muriel — the two have been married 37 years — immediately left town for their cabin off State Route 180, the main road from Fresno into Kings Canyon National Park.

The cabin, which they still own, is less than 20 miles from the house where they now live.

Two days later, Muriel's mother died, and she had to return to Ventura County.

Someone else came to stay with Henry — his father.

"I thought that was pretty nice," King said, adding: "My dad never said anything about the verdict."



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