

McCoy, Eddie: Write-Off Kids ^[1]

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Eddie McCoy: Write-off Kids

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 12/12/2004. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

Eddie McCoy stands at the heart of historian Tim Tyson's stirring new memoir, [Blood Done Sign My Name](#) ^[3]. The book tells the heart-rending story of the 1970 racial murder of a black man named Henry Marrow in Oxford, N.C., and the protests, riots and fire bombings that subsequently shook the town to its foundations.

McCoy was then one of the town's most militant civil rights activists, an angry young man who "really didn't have time to talk to white people." Today he is a successful small-businessman and accomplished local historian who greets the world with a playful smile and a warm handshake.

Last fall he and Tim visited one of my college classes. My students wanted to know, above all, why McCoy had lost faith in nonviolent protest. Was it the killing of Henry Marrow? Or was it, like for so many of the Black Power generation, because of Vietnam and Dr. King's assassination?

McCoy shook his head and, in a real low voice, said, "No, I didn't need any of that to make me angry back then." And he started talking about his childhood.



Eddie McCoy. Photo by Chris Seward, 2004. To request permission for ~~Eddie McCoy~~ to purchase a print, please contact the *News & Observer*.

I was a write-off kid from the time I was born. My father was an orphan and my mother was more or less an orphan too. They didn't have anything. My mother scrubbed white people's floors and my father worked three jobs until he could open our house was one of those shotgun houses. Shotgun house is just what it says: You can take a shotgun and shoot through it. You can feed the chickens through the cracks in the floor. It snows in the house. It rains in the house. Brother, you don't know what it is to have snow in your house. You can't imagine that, can you? And you had one plug, one receptacle, in the house! Everything run off a drop cord. And you had an outdoor toilet. Didn't even have toilet paper. That's what you call a shotgun house. But I'll tell you one thing -- poor kids can fight better than people got something. I learned that in the civil rights movement. The poor kids didn't have anything to lose.

My grandmother used to take us to the 5- and 10-cent store. We would want water and she would say, "You have to wait until we get back home." We'd say, why? "Because you can't drink from that water fountain. It's for white people."

We thought the water was white. (He laughs.) She said it was for white people and the sign said, "White Only." We wanted some of the water because we had never had white water.

The things that we couldn't do, I always wanted to know why we couldn't do them. The things that you had that I didn't have, I always wanted to know why I couldn't have them.

I was in the barbershop two weeks ago and all the old guys were talking about playing baseball. Our baseball bat was a grubbing hoe handle. You don't know what a grubbing hoe is. You take a grubbing hoe and take off the handle and that's what you want to know where our bicycles came from? The white orphanage in town. What happened, in November, they would take their bicycles to the trash pile and throw them away, because they had different companies, different people, but we would take those bicycles, clean them up and paint them and tell people Santa Claus brought us a bicycle. That was our Christmas.

I don't have any problem with being poor. It was fine. It was good for me. But I was just one of the lucky ones. I didn't have to stay poor my whole life.

When we were kids, we used to work for a white guy. There was a judge in our town. You kids wouldn't believe this -- this is crazy. He was a real judge, but he would drive us around and say crazy things about us.

He would make us do things to each other that we thought were wrong. Like, he'd take us to get apples. One of us would climb the tree, and he'd say, take a rock or brick and knock him from up there. And if we started fighting, he thought that was wrong. One day my grandmother was sitting on the porch -- this is weird -- and she was rocking and he came to pick us up. We got in the car and you know what he said? "Look at that big black Patty sitting on the porch." My grandmother was named Patty. My grandmother jumped up and started for the car. She said, "I'll make them all get out!" And me and my friends told my grandmother, "Naw, don't make us get out. Let us go and work for the guy."

She didn't understand: We could endure it because we were young. We could take it. What little money we made would help, and they didn't have any money to give us. You understand where I'm coming from?

We started taking things into our own hands in 1970 when Henry Marrow got killed. We were hanging out at the Soul Food Kitchen, the little place that Ben Chavis' mama had, and we knew we were going to do something about it. They had a sign that said "White Only." But our group -- the street people -- knew it wasn't going to work. We had different answers. We said, the only way this is going to work is, you either have to burn somebody's buildings down or break some windows or do something violent. It wasn't the right way, but I didn't think nonviolence would work. Martin Luther King was never my favorite. I admired him. I liked what he stood for. But I was in the sit-ins. I was in the marches. And after awhile, people just weren't listening to

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