

Walter Ware— Orange County's Good Humor man and the Mayor of Main



The Mayor of Main, Walter Ware, is a stranger to no one in Orange County. A bartender during his spare time, he even knows what everybody drinks! The end of next month will be a sad day for many when Walter steps down and retires.

Photo by Phil Audibert

This sounds kind of corny, but Walter Ware is the world's greatest guy. Always ready with a smile and a greeting, he probably knows more people in this area than anybody...truly a good humor man.

"I was the Good Humor man," he insists when talking of the days he worked on an ice cream truck delivering popsicles, ice cream sandwiches and scoop ice cream to every little country store from Spotsylvania to Shadwell.

But Walter Ware is best remembered as "the Mayor of Main."

"I know everybody. Yes, the Mayor of Main, that's what they call me," his eyes twinkle mischievously. "I've been on Main Street for 46 years. I graduated from high school; six months later I went to work for the bank."

He remembers that day vividly. He heard that Citizen's National Bank President, John Brown wanted to see him. Walter mimics Brown's ponderous speaking style. "Walter," he intones, "we've decided to give you this job." "Walter stood there dumbfounded; he had not even applied for the job. "So I thanked him very much...I stayed there 34 years." Walter Ware survived six bank name changes: Citizens National, People's Bank, Virginia National, NationsBank, Sovran, and Bank of America. The only thing that didn't change was Walter.

"I was doing *everything* at the bank," he remembers. "People wanting to see their safety deposit box, I'd let 'em in... I liked doing everybody's work except my own," he jokes. "I kept it clean, I'd greet the folk, lock it at night." Did he ever witness a bank robbery? "No, we never did," he pauses for effect. "I was there, remember?" Big laugh. "I was the designated guard." Did he carry a gun? "No, no, no, no... probably woulda shot myself," he shudders.

In the mid 1990s, Walter's job was contracted out. "Of course I was down, because I loved that bank. The people there were great. They still treat me like I'm still there." And so, Walter worked for the contractor part-time and crossed Main Street to work as custodian for the county. No matter; he's still the Mayor of Main.

If you don't know Walter from his jobs on Main Street, you probably know him from a cocktail party. For decades now, Walter and his trusty sidekick, James Monroe, dressed in their white jackets and black bow ties, their attaché cases containing the tools of the trade, have served as bartenders at just about every public and private social function in Orange County.

"You can almost look at people and tell what they drink," says Walter sagely. It's uncanny how he remembers what everyone drinks. "Once they tell you, it's logged into the computer...up here," he taps his forehead. "People come up and they like me because I can remember what they drink....People are nice. They're really nice to us. They're crazy about us actually."

Does he drink himself? "I did," he responds candidly. "Not much now; I might take a taste, but not like I used to. I wouldn't give anybody the poison that I wouldn't taste first." There's that mischievous grin again.

Here's something you probably didn't know. Walter and his brother Howard were fabulous baseball players. They played on the undefeated 1959 George Washington Carver High School baseball team, "and they wouldn't let us play any championships or anything... wouldn't let us play anybody," he grouses resentfully. That's probably because they would have beaten anybody they played, and back in 1959, well...

Walter and Howard played for the Orange Nats.

"We were actually as good as a semi-pro team," says Walter, not bragging. "We played all over the place...We were good."

One of the reasons for the team's success is seven of the players batted lefty. "That would drive people crazy," laughs Walter. "I am a left-handed batter, but I'm ambidextrous actually. I could throw with either hand. That was something I taught myself to do."

Walter played first base; Howard, outfield... "He can run. He was one of the best outfielders you'd see." Walter's batting average was "pretty close to .300. I didn't learn how to hit till I got old. My daddy used to say I had the prettiest swing you ever saw." In fact, a Negro League scout tried to recruit Walter. Lucky for us, he didn't take the bait.

As it is, we won't be able to keep him long anyway. Walter Ware, the Good Humor man, the Mayor of Main, husband to Jane, father of three and grandfather of several will retire at age 65 at the end of next month, to howls of protest. He will continue to tend bar, however, and do his beloved crossword puzzles and restore his classic cars. "And I want to add onto the house. I really like building too. And then too we do a lot of stuff at church, we do a lot of repairs at church"...the same church, Emmanuel Baptist, that his grandfather helped found.

Walter looks up in mock surprise. "I'm supposed to be working right?" He starts vacuuming the cramped and crammed Gordonsville branch of the Orange Library. As he leaves with the trash, he says good-naturedly, "All right ladies...be good...If not, be careful." The librarians twitter.

Everybody loves this man. March 31 will be a sad day. But Walter figures 46 years is enough. "It's time to go home," he says succinctly. "I've been out a long time."

From Jim Crow...

Margaret East Ware has roots set deep in Orange County. If she walks out her back door and strolls south, she will reach her birthplace, Oakley, in less than five minutes.

If she goes north a half mile she'll be able to see where the old bridge spanned the chasm of the railroad tracks...a bridge she crossed every day as a child on her way to the Orange Graded School...a school that her father, Willie Roger East demanded the school board build.

If she goes to Gordonsville, she will be at her father's birthplace. If she travels along the old Rapidan Road, she'll be retracing her father's footsteps that day in 1891 when he ran away from home at age 12.

Or, she could swing by Church Street where her hus-

through the Civil Rights Era...

band, Walter Ware grew up and where his grandparent's home still stands near Emmanuel Baptist Church...the church where her father was a charter member, her husband sexton, her sons trustees, and herself, clerk for 40 years.

She could look at Satchell's Funeral Home and remember when it was the Orange Creamery where her husband Walter "Billy" Ware churned the butter and packed it in 60-pound cartons. Or she could walk down to Mill Street where she and "Billy" raised their three sons and two daughters, now grandparents themselves. Or she could go up Main Street to the Bank of America where son Walter, the "Mayor of Main," worked for 34 years through six bank name changes. Or she could follow the railroad tracks around to where her son, Howard, in 1962, showed up for work at Virginia Metal Products, the local industry's first black employee.

Yes, Margaret East Ware, and her entire amazing family, has roots set deep in Orange County. And, it being Black History Month, this family has a story to tell, a story that somehow mirrors the black experience, from Jim Crow through the Civil Rights era to the Promised Land.

to the Promised Land



Margaret East Ware poses next to a Black History Month display relating her family's rich past. The photo over her right shoulder is of her father, Willie East, who ran away from home at age 12 and eventually came to work at Oakley Farm just south of Orange.

Photo by Susie Audibert

Let's start at the beginning.

Willie Roger East was born in Gordonsville around 1879. His mother died when he was small; his father died shortly after, but not before the 12-year-old ran away from an abusive caregiver. "He just walked away," says Margaret. "And he was walking down the road and this man came along in a wagon and asked him where he was going, and he told them he was running away. He (a white man named Tucker) told him to hop on the wagon."

Willie East learned to be a farmer...a good one. He started out doing farm chores in the Rapidan area, moved to a farm owned by the Grymes family where the Holiday Inn Express is now, and ended up working on hardware store owner, Walter W. Ware's farm, Oakley, on Route 20 just south of Orange.

It is interesting to note that Margaret East Ware's husband-to-be was also named Walter Ware. Prior to emancipation, slaves were frequently identified by just a first name. Upon gaining freedom, many adopted their former masters' surname. We don't know if the white Walter Ware's ancestors owned the black Walter Ware's ancestors. If they did, it would be quite the coincidence.

In 1898, Margaret's father, Willie East married Susie Shepherd. He was 19; she 18. They started a family...14 kids in all! "And I was the 13th child," whoops Margaret.

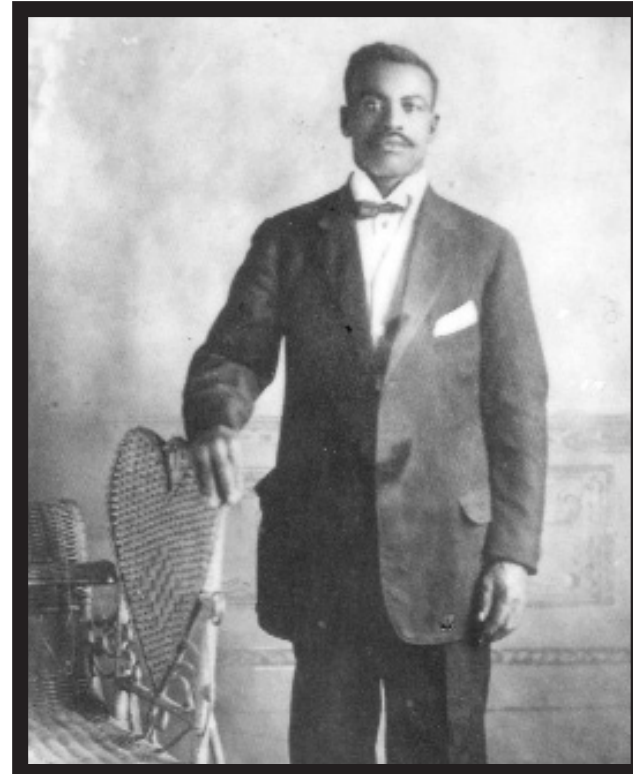
Her earliest memories are of men toiling in the fields, she and her siblings spending carefree summers jumping into haystacks and riding work horses during the midday "dinner" break. "And we would run up to the barn, my sister and I, so we could get a horse and take him down to the branch to drink. And I never will forget one time I was on one horse and she was on the other and one horse would get down to the branch and get on his knees to drink. My sister fell off the horse and went down in the water. We laughed about that."

Margaret also remembers neighbors bringing her father young colts to break to harness. Her mother, Susie, was an accomplished seamstress. "They cooked from scratch back in those days...making bread three times a day, breakfast, dinner and supper. Oh, yes indeed...right off the farm, made the butter, raised chickens; we had the eggs and milk to make the butter. The only food that was bought from the store was coffee, tea, seasonings and sugar."

In the winter, they piled the blankets high and huddled around the wood stove for warmth. "They'd toughen up to the weather too," adds Margaret. "I went to school with a boy from Gordonsville...the boy went to school all winter barefooted." Margaret's son Howard echoes, "Some of our kids went to school from Mill Street barefooted, and I mean with snow on the ground."



Susie Shepherd, Margaret Ware's mother, raised seven boys and seven girls on Oakley Farm. One of her daughters, her namesake, Susie East Dade was the last practicing midwife in Orange County. She gave it up in the late 1970s.



Willie Roger East was born in Gordonsville around 1879. Orphaned as a child, he ran away from home at age 12, was picked up on the Rapidan Road by a man named Tucker who took him in. Later, he became a respected farmer at Oakley for Orange hardware store owner, Walter Ware. Willie East and his wife Susie Shepherd raised 14 children, Margaret East Ware being the lucky 13th.

Margaret's first school was located near where Preddy's Funeral Home is today. "One day, my brother came home and he had lice in his head, and he (her father, Willie East) was just furious. And he went to the school board and just told them and raised Cain about it how they needed a new school." The result was the Orange Graded School, built near Prospect Heights. "My father, he was an educated man and he believed in education and he was very instrumental in trying to get that school so the children had it better."

Asked how she met her future husband, Margaret shrugs and says, "I've been knowin' him all my life as children, school; his parents and my parents were friends."

"Billy" worked his entire adult life, 50 years, for the Monticello Dairy in Charlottesville. In the beginning, the dairy had a creamery in Orange on Church Street, where Satchell's Funeral Home is today. Walter's job was to churn the cream into butter and pack the butter in 60-pound cartons that were loaded onto a tractor trailer and shipped north.

Some of young Howard and Walter's enduring memories are of delivering milk through the town. "Walter and I used to get up at 4 o'clock in the morning; I mean we were young kids. Walter would be on one side of the milk truck and I would be on the other side. He got everything on the right, and I got everything on the left," says Howard. "And then we'd go home and take a nap and *then* we'd go to school." In wintertime the frozen cream would push the cap of the milk bottle straight up...a cardboard hat on a pillar of frozen cream.

In those days, their only pay was spare change from the truck driver. Walter remembers, "I tell you...we'd run out the truck with the milk and jump back on, we'd be settin' on a little stool in the doorway, fallin' asleep."

And so the Ware and East families grew and thrived and married and raised children and grandchildren and moved away or stayed here, and were called home to the Promised Land. But through it all ran a connecting thread that drew them back to Orange. "We used to have some good family reunions...had one every year," remembers Howard.

In 1983, former Orange Mayor, Ted Carroll wrote, "Nothing in this world is more satisfying than seeing a large and good family make a contribution to mankind and in doing so make their parents proud. May the tradition of the East Family live on as the torch is passed from generation to generation."

Today, three of the original 14 children of Willie East and Susie Shepherd survive. One lives in Georgia; one lives in Pennsylvania, and one lives right here within walking distance of her birthplace in Orange County.

Howard Ware—"It's going to be tough"



Margaret Ware is flanked by her sons, Howard (left) and Walter (right). The occasion was a celebration of Black History Month at The Arts Center in Orange a year ago. The display behind the Wares tells the family's history.

Photo by Phil Audibert

It was 1961. The holiday season was approaching. Miles Pickett, the manager of Leggett's Department Store on Main Street, needed extra help. He hired Howard Ware as a temp to assemble bicycles and toys in anticipation of the Christmas rush.

After the holidays passed, Mr. Pickett turned to Howard and said, "Your job here is winding down, but we've got a job for you. It's going to be tough. We need a black person to integrate Virginia Metal Products." He paused to let this sink in and repeated the warning, "It's going to be tough."

Howard, who had just graduated from the segregated George Washington Carver High School, thinks back to those memorable words. "Mr. Pickett, I need a job," he remembers saying earnestly. And so Howard Ware became Orange's own James Meredith. He took a job as a Material Controls Clerk at Virginia Metal Products, a local industry with 500 employees, all of them white. He worked in the office; it would be too dangerous to put him on the assembly line. "Every day that I came to work as I came in and went upstairs, it looked like the whole shop plant would stop. 'There he goes, There he goes,' he heard the men on the assembly line whispering. "I was the only black person there."

Howard walked to work along the railroad tracks from his home on Mill Street. When he turned into the long VMP entrance road, workers who drove cars to work wouldn't stop to give him a ride in. At quitting time they wouldn't offer him a ride out. "Oh it was rough, it was rough."

And then one day he noticed it was becoming easier. "I have to say that my father knew everyone in Orange and most of the people that worked there, they knew my father. And as they found out who I was, they'd say, 'Well that's Billy Ware's son. He's alright!' And as time went on people became more friendly." Now that's the power of family.

Howard remembers if he and his friends wanted a ham-

burger, "When we went into a restaurant or a service station there was a sign that said 'Colored.' We knew that when Mr. Halley had the service station down there...we knew when we bought those hamburgers he wasn't going to let us eat in there. We were not in the mood to rock the boat. So we went in, got our hamburger and came outside and ate it."

Believe it or not, there was a humorous side to all this. Howard and his brother Walter played baseball. "We used to go down there and play with the white kids all day long," he remembers fondly. But when it came time to go to the movies at the Pitts Madison Theatre on Main Street, "we had to sit in the balcony...they had a line for the blacks and a line for the whites going in, and all these people that you had played with during the day, it was like 'I don't know you; you don't know me.'"

Howard's mom, Margaret cracks up hearing this story again.

"It was funny," Howard confirms. "We also found out that we had the best seats. When integration came in and we could sit anywhere, most of us still went upstairs because you could see better looking down than looking up." And from the balcony seats, the blacks would merrily pelt the white audience below with popcorn and candy. There is some justice in this world.

Howard Ware stuck it out with VMP for 10 years. Then, he took a job with C & P Telephone as a repairman, working mostly in Louisa County. "I went into some people's houses who wouldn't even let me come through the front door. 'You come 'round back,' they would say. "I had some people down in Louisa, it didn't matter what I did, I couldn't fix their phone." But when a white repairman "came behind" him, suddenly the "trouble on the line" miraculously disappeared.

Howard was good at his job. He was promoted and transferred to Northern Virginia to work with AT&T

installing communications systems for the government. These were exciting times in the communications industry. He witnessed first-hand the mind boggling leap in technology that happened during the 1980s and 90s. "I saw a lot," he confirms. "All our work was done on a computer. We had the four branches of the military, and we provided all the communications for the federal government's four branches of service, for their whole phone system. We had a satellite system...we had part of the Pentagon, the FAA, NASA, CIA, NSA. We had security clearance...It was fascinating...I was very fortunate that I got the job and was able to comprehend and move on with the new system...AT&T taught me all...It was big time."

In 2001, Howard retired to his home in Culpeper County. But he still shops and conducts his business in Orange. He and his mom have seen many changes in their hometown and, he warns that Orange should not make the same mistakes that Culpeper has. "Orange doesn't have any water," he says. "That's the biggest problem they have in this county. They don't have the water."

Reflecting on what he went through during the 1960s and 70s, he bears no grudge. Concerning his sacrifices and the fact that the younger generation doesn't seem to appreciate it, he reasons, "I guess it is hard for them to understand where we came from if you've never been there." Just like the baby boomers have no idea what it was like to survive the Great Depression.

On a book shelf in his mother's house is a portrait of Martin Luther King. Howard Ware shakes his head. "These kids... there is so much stuff that comes so easy to them. They make good money, and they don't mind quitting a job and getting a better job than they had. They just don't see how Martin Luther King and all the sacrifices that were made, really benefited them, because they all went to integrated schools. They don't see it."