

Sanitation strike veteran remembers past, cherishes progress

By Zack McMillin

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The man is 76 now, in his 54th year on the job, and he's maneuvering the leviathan of a truck through declining neighborhoods near the Memphis interstate. Elmore Nickelberry's night shift has begun, and he commands truck S2007, its hulking yellow form recognizable to any 5-year-old in Memphis, its familiar snarling and chugging as distinctive and unmistakable as any of a city's noises -- a garbage truck, so essential to a city's health, so often taken for granted.

Those in the passing cars headed Downtown on this cold January night might just discern the two figures inside, the driver, a black man with silver hair and wide sideburns peeking forth from the Nike swoosh hat and the hooded, bundled passenger -- a 42-year-old black mother of five.

Those passing cannot know of the history the man has seen and experienced, nor the intimate knowledge of a city that accumulates after five decades of collecting its garbage. They cannot know the story contained in Elmore Nickelberry reaches back to the Civil War and traces the long, difficult journey traveled by black men in Memphis.

And within his family's story resides the convulsions of struggle and progress, the revealed good and the unavoidable ill, of a city that continues to reconcile itself with the events unleashed 40 years ago when a group of 1,300 of its hardest working men petitioned Memphis for decent wages, for basic rights, for dignity and respect.

They are growing old now, many of them retired, but 30 of those who were on strike in 1968 remain on the job -- most, like Nickelberry, blended into the daily landscape, their place in history secure but their future, without any pension, still uncertain.

Officially, Nickelberry is an employee of the City of Memphis Department of Solid Waste Management.

More precisely, he is a Memphis sanitation worker, the phrase itself now woven into the story of America. Of those 30 workers still active in the department who were on the force during the strike, Nickelberry goes back the farthest, his wage having risen from 75 cents an hour when he started in 1954 to more than \$16 an hour now.

But Nickelberry knows that to many Memphians he remains, simply, a garbage man.

A walking buzzard -- that's what so many called him and his fellow workers when he started, toting on his head tubs that dripped the sludge and refuse of Memphis onto his back and shoulders.

"Sometimes I would get on inside the truck and they would throw them 55-gallon barrels up to me, and garbage would be up to my waist and I'd be all wet with that wet garbage," Nickelberry says. "So when you got home, most of the time I'd put my clothes out of doors before I came in the house."

Nickelberry has told these stories to the younger workers. Some, like his 43-year-old son Terence, a dayside crew chief and operator of a front-end loader, appreciate it. More often, say Nickelberry and his peers, younger workers regard their tales as the natterings of old men crazy to have ever taken so little money and so much abuse for such grueling work.

These, say the veterans of the strike, are youngsters unaware of what came before them, unappreciative of the opportunities made possible by their forebears, unable to fathom a time when jobs for black men were so dirty and demeaning that a man had to accept \$20 a week take-home pay for backbreaking work.

When Nickelberry left the Army in 1954, after fighting in Korea with the Eighth Armored Division, he expected to find work and assumed his duty to country would win some respect in his hometown. Much like his father, who fought in World War I, Nickelberry returned instead to a city that still required him to sit upstairs at the movies in his Douglass neighborhood, still made him drink at separate water fountains, still would not serve him at the front counter.

And so many of the jobs available for black men paid poverty wages.

"I figure if a man go overseas and fight for his country, I think he should have a right to get a decent job," Nickelberry says. "I hate to say this, but we was treated more better over there than we was here. We got respect."

Nickelberry turned to the city, hoping to get a job he knew would be "worse than pretty rough." His older brother, Roosevelt, was already working sanitation.

"I come to the city and spent three weeks standing outside the gate," Nickelberry says. "There was a foreman named Mr. Finney, he saw me and said, 'Boy, you been here two or three weeks standing outside this gate. You want a job?'

"I said, 'Yessir.' He said, 'C'mon in here.' So I got the job."

All these years later, working conditions have improved vastly -- thanks in part to technology, in larger part to the 65-day strike in 1968 that won union recognition and the protection it afforded.

Nickelberry, like many of the strike veterans still on the force, says he would likely be retired if he had access to a city pension. He says this without complaint, preferring to dwell instead on progress that has occurred, captured vividly in the example of his own son.

Terence, a South Side High graduate, wanted to work sanitation. His supervisors recall him arriving early and staying late, eager to learn how to operate equipment -- the surest route to promotion. Now he runs a crew, operates a front-end loader, is a leader in his union and owns a house in Raleigh -- things that were not possible when his father was coming up.

Elmore and his wife, 64-year-old Mary 'Peggy' Ray Nickelberry, love bragging on Terence, who also works at WMC-TV Channel 5. "He's a good boy, treat people like he want to be treated and he's very smart," Elmore says. "He's got opportunities I did not have. He started at the bottom and worked his way up. I hope he can go farther and farther with the city."

The perspective of history often exists only in the abstract, vulnerable to interpretation, rendered irrelevant by the passing of time and those who lived it.

Yet here in Downtown Memphis, on a frigid night two days after the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, history becomes tangible, embodied in this 76-year-old great-grandson of a slave -- Elmore Nickelberry's own *grandfather* was born in 1866 -- slinging garbage from those same streets where he once marched for his rights.

With the temperatures plummeting into the 20s, Nickelberry wears a fluorescent yellow safety vest over a blue sweatshirt and blue pants, his hands protected only by thin brown jersey gloves. He keeps his driver-side window down as he drives, to prevent fluctuations in temperature he believes causes a cold.

Nickelberry says he does not suffer arthritis, despite a job that requires him, hundreds of times each night, to clamber up and down from a perch 8 feet above the ground. Maybe Nickelberry moves slower than he once did, but this is no tottering old man. His steps are measured and careful, but efficient.

He's worked nights for almost four decades now, and only five years ago retired from his day job, driving school buses in Frayser and Raleigh. Grown men still stop him, at stores or at church, to proclaim him as their bus driver.

Nickelberry was there when busing first began in the early '70s, after the city stopped resisting federal court orders and enforced a busing plan intended to integrate Memphis schools.

"They had some principals in them schools that hate to see black kids coming," Nickelberry says. "Then you had some teachers, white teachers and black teachers, they see them little kids from Douglass, they stub their noses at them. I say regardless what kind of kids they is, they got to teach 'em."

Nickelberry's task this night is disposing of garbage from Downtown businesses and governmental offices -- some of it in the ubiquitous green carts that have eased the sanitation worker's burden, some of it in the steel barrels he once fetched from backyards, some of it contained in bags, like those stacked outside the Shelby County building.

At the fire station on Jefferson, several long fluorescent lighting tubes greet Nickelberry and his partner, Alura Frazier. Nickelberry grabs them and raises them high above his head, like Zeus delivering lightning bolts.

"Cover your eyes," Frazier warns, and the shattering glass echoes into the darkness.

Nickelberry has known hard work since birth -- he was the unexpected second of twin boys, born in a house in Douglass, precariously fighting for life in a day and time when it was not uncommon for babies to die right after birth.

"You know how it was: Doctor looked in there and say, 'Here's one. Hold on, hold on. Here come another one,'" Nickelberry says, laughing at the oft-told story.

Everyone in Elmore's neighborhood called his father, Earl Nickelberry, the "Buffalo Man" because he constantly hustled fruit or peanuts or ice cream, "two for a Buffalo nickel." Earl -- who, when he died in 1999 at age 107, had 17 children and stepchildren, 24 grandchildren, 51 great-grandchildren, 14 great-great-grandchildren, 12 great-great-great-grandchildren and four great-great-great-great-grandchildren -- also worked briefly in sanitation, but it wasn't for him.

"He said he could make more money with his mule and wagon than working for the city," Nickelberry says. "He plowed yards, cut yards, corded wood. My daddy bought a wagon near about every year, from Sears-Roebuck. Sold ice cream from his bicycle."

Elmore remembers being younger than 10 and his father organizing crews to ride out to Millington and Tipton County -- where Earl had grown up -- to pick cotton.

"My daddy would carry me up there to pick cotton, but I never could get over 150 pounds," he says. "My brothers get 300, 400 pounds. Daddy told me, 'You stay at home and cook.' "

Elmore left school after the sixth grade, and found work at various places, including making ice cream for the Klinke Brothers. "I remember that 100 pounds of sugar we'd put in that big vat, make strawberry, vanilla," he says.

All these years later, heavy lifting remains part of his job requirement -- a mechanic has discarded a huge door and a barrel filled with belts, hoses and discarded parts. It is a two-person crew this night, just Nickelberry and his partner, and they team up to move the trash into the back of the truck before the hydraulic arm crushes it.

They will cover the same streets and alleys that Nickelberry and the 1,300 men came to know that winter of 1968. To the father and boys leaving the NBA game at FedExForum, Downtown is designed as an urban playground, with Beale Street geared to entertainment and tourism and a swank new hotel reaching to the sky.

Nickelberry sees something else.

"That's where we would march," he's saying as he passes FedExForum. "We would come down Beale to Main and down to City Hall. That's when the police would jump us. That's where you would get your whooping. I caught Mace, too, all over me."

They will stop on Mulberry, a block from the converted motel -- it is now the National Civil Rights Museum -- where King was killed on April 4, 1968.

"I was on my way down to Clayborn Temple, and they said, 'Mr. Martin King got killed,'" Nickleberry says. "I said, 'God dog.' And I just turned around, went home and crawled under the bed."

Nickelberry's supervisor is Mike Camurati, a Sector Administrator for Solid Waste Management. He is a Christian Brothers High graduate and son of white Memphis who has come to regard the Nickelberry family with great admiration.

Terence and his father return it in kind.

"He's been invaluable, and Elmo to this day is one of the best workers we've got," Camurati says. "It's nice having someone like that you can depend on. He's the kind of man where you say, 'Elmo, go do this,' and you don't have to worry about it. You know it's going to get done."

Camurati remembers that awful April 4 day in 1968. He was a student at Memphis State and ran a route for The Commercial Appeal, filling the racks Downtown with the first edition of newspapers known then as the bulldog run -- the first draft of the next day's news, on the streets by 8 the night before.

When the police stopped Camurati that April 4 night near the Lorraine, he had no idea his own future was intertwined with those workers King died supporting.

Camurati remembers meeting Nickelberry in 1971, when he first started as a clerk.

"It was a whole new world for me," he says. "... coming from where I came from, it was like nothing I had ever been used to."

"When I came, they were still going in backyards with No. 3 metal tubs. I don't know how they got anybody to do that job."

It's a better job now. For one thing, workers are allowed to head home when they finish their routes. The pay is better. Vacations and holidays are generous.

Yet on a 20-degree night when trash is plentiful after a long holiday weekend, the job remains arduous. Some nights Nickelberry and his crew forego breaks, but not this one.

A full moon is just visible behind a scrim of clouds as Nickelberry and Frazier duck into the Tiger Mart at Poplar and Danny Thomas Boulevard. "I need a little fresh-me-up," Nickelberry says.

They linger inside with others escaping the cold. Nickelberry nods at a white policeman, who politely smiles -- unaware that in his presence stands a piece of Memphis history.

Camurati isn't sure Nickelberry will ever really retire -- Elmore's brother Roosevelt was with Solid Waste for more than 40 years before his death, at age 73, in 2005. "At his age, it amazes me he is still working," Camurati says. "But he's in good shape. That guy can pretty much do anything. He'll probably keep working, doing something, until the day he dies."

On a sunny January day, the well-kept white cottage in South Memphis is being tended by an old black man in his blue City of Memphis sanitation department coveralls. Elmore Nickelberry clears leaves from the curb and piles them into a wheel-barrow so rusted it might be older than he is.

The house stares across to Forest Hill cemetery, and countless golfers coming from the interstate have turned past it on their way to Pine Hill Golf Course.

"My cousins, they play golf, but I can't hit that ball," Nickelberry says. "They all hit that ball and stand there and follow it. I say, 'Let that ball go on.' "

Not that Nickelberry would ever have had time for golf, forever working two jobs, raising seven children, singing in the church choir. He prefers spending time at movies, his favorites about "cowboys or soldiers" with John Wayne or Clint Eastwood. "I would walk in the rain to go see that man Eastwood's movies," he says.

Inside the well-kept house, a framed print greets visitors -- "A Penny Short" by Harry Roseland, showing an older black couple sorting their rent money on a table. His wife, Mary, keeps religious figurines in a cabinet, and another framed print shows Da Vinci's famous "Last Supper," but with a black Jesus and African-American disciples.

It was on a March day in 1990 that the family came to know another side of Memphis' character, a part of the city predating even his father -- murderous violence. It was Elmore who walked into the house and discovered his 19-year-old daughter, Tondalaya, stabbed to death. The intruder would be convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison; the murder still haunts him and his wife.

"You come home, open the door and something happen to your children? It do something to you," Nickelberry says. "She ain't over it yet, not even now. On holidays and Christmastime and her birthday, she will just sit there, quiet."

There are now 16 grandchildren spread among six children. They often visit the South Memphis home on Sundays, when Mary cooks up a big meal, and this summer the 20th Nickelberry family reunion is being held in Memphis, with plans for more than 200 to attend from all over the world.

Past reunion books show the clan coming from two directions -- the Nickelberrys of Tipton County from Elmore's great-grandfather, Jerry, born in 1839, and the Texas side from Crockett, born 1835.

In many ways, Elmore Nickelberry's life extends the notion of family beyond blood relatives and into the neighborhoods where he once toted dripping tubs of garbage on his head, to the children of Frayser and Raleigh he transported to school and to Downtown, the front porch of Memphis he works to keep clean and attractive.

"Memphis is my home. I feel better when I am at home," Nickelberry says. "I think Memphis is a great city. But like I said, it could be better. You got some good people, you got some bad people. I don't care where you go, you gonna have that."

On the morning of Jan. 21, Elmore and his son, Terence, joined a few hundred others for a Martin Luther King Jr. holiday march to the National Civil Rights Museum. A stage was erected across the street from the motel balcony where King had been assassinated 40 years ago, when he came to Memphis to support Nickelberry and his fellow sanitation workers.

"When I was a kid, I was just like every other little kid saying, 'Look at that garbage man, what a dirty job,'" Terence says. "Then one day my daddy sat me down and told me the story."

When the father talks about the strike and King's murder, he sometimes gets emotional.

"It hurt me. He was a great man," Nickelberry says. "It brought tears to my eyes, and when I talk about it now, it still do something to me. I think about the hard times. We had some hard times. I don't like to talk about it, but we went through some rough times. We made a way for young peoples and I hope we never go through that again"

There was a rally that frigid morning launching a mentoring program for black youth, and the dais included some of Memphis' most promising young black leaders as well as black executives from national companies behind the movement.

Some of the children wore homemade sandwich boards that read, "I WANT TO BE A MAN," an homage to the iconic "I AM A MAN" signs brandished by Nickelberry and his colleagues during the strike.

His posture ramrod straight and his breath visible in the brittle air, Elmore stood next to Terence just below the balcony. He was anonymous in this crowd, but the children of Memphis could do worse than study the story of Elmore Nickelberry and the men like him who demanded their due, their dignity.

The following night, Elmore would be back down the block, slinging bags of garbage into the truck, earning his keep -- and his dignity -- the best way he knows how.

"You ever seen that Energizer Bunny? That's him," Terence says. "My daddy opened doors for me. I keep striving every day to make him proud."

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