

## Lewis, Joe: We Weren't Afraid <sup>[1]</sup>

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## Joe Lewis: We Weren't Afraid

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) <sup>[2]</sup>," *News & Observer*. Published 6/8/2003. Copyrighted.  
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I met Joe Lewis in Louisburg, the county seat of [Franklin County](#) <sup>[3]</sup>, 25 miles northeast of Raleigh. A vigorous 81-year-old who still breaks and trains horses, Lewis has never considered himself a civil rights activist. In 1947, however, he and four other Army veterans of World War II stood up for their right to vote and, in their corner of the world, made history.

Under the leadership of Gov. [Charles Aycock](#) <sup>[4]</sup>, North Carolina had taken away its black citizens' right to vote in 1900. Literacy tests, poll taxes, white terrorism and [grandfather clauses](#) <sup>[5]</sup> "all prevented blacks from voting, but so did not owning land. Most of the state's rural black citizens were tenant farmers, like Lewis' family, and they risked eviction and ruin if they tried to register to vote.

The tenant farming system was especially harsh in Franklin and the other majority-black counties along the Roanoke and Tar rivers. In those places, I often hear older people still refer to the farm where they sharecropped as "the plantation," the company store as "the commissary," the groceries advanced them by the farm owner as "their rations" -- all terms left over from slavery.

Everything began to change when black veterans like Lewis came home from World War II. Having fought for freedom overseas, they began to demand freedom here. They are the forgotten pioneers in the state's civil rights movement.



Joe Lewis. Photo by Chris Seward, 2003. To request permission for ~~for Joe Lewis to purchase a print~~, please contact the *News & Observer*.

I was born and raised in Franklin County, a place out on 401 called Royal. There's two stores there, a store on the right and a store on the left, and that's Royal. My family was farmers. My grandfather, his father was a slave. He was raised right there. Our parents didn't teach us about registering to vote. Nobody voted in Royal. My dad didn't tell me nothing about no voting, and I know his dad never said anything to him and he was in World War I. He was a veteran, but he didn't register to vote. They were afraid. If they had tried to register, well, it would have been a sad situation, I'll tell you. Not only kicked off the farm -- ain't no telling what liable to happen to you. They'd have got hurt. Got hurt pretty bad. You know about the Ku Klux Klan. There were a whole lot of hangings, good gracious. There was one right over here off of 98. They hung him right beside of the road. My cousin, he carried his boys over there so they would always be afraid of white people. Took them there a while. Rev. Dennis Williams and Mr. George Hall, they were the only two registered voters that there were in that community. They were old fellows. That's what impressed me so much. Mr. Hall didn't have a first-grade education, and he got where he was by himself. I figured if those old guys could do it, we could do it. The rest of them, they'd say, "Man, no, I ain't going down there and have those white folk getting hold of me." I begged people. At my church I begged the people. But there were only five of us. I'm an old infantryman, a platoon sergeant. And yeah, the war changed me, changed us all. Great day in the morning, me and Vann done been all over in the Philippines. John, Sidney, the two oldest boys, they were in Germany. I had been in Germany. Overseas, we were together. I don't care how high a rank you had, you get out there in the jungle, you were just out there. And they didn't call you no "boy" in the service. Don't care how high ranking an officer, you better not come up and call me no officer. In the Army when the going got rough, you just get where it doesn't bother you. Same thing happened about this case. We didn't care what happened. We just made up our mind that we were going to register and we went on and did it. We went on. There was a school right off of 98 called Harris' School where we went to register. I never will forget it. When we got there, there were five white fellows sitting out on the steps. They wouldn't move, so we just turned and walked on by. When we got to the registrar, we didn't say anything to them. We just kept standing. So the registrar, he got nervous, you know. He finally said, real weaklike, "Can you read the Constitution?" I said, "If it's written in English I can read it." He got his book, turned around, said, "I want you to read three paragraphs." So I read the three paragraphs. See, all five of us could read. A lot of the guys that were a lot older, they didn't go to school. If they couldn't read it, they go back out there. So he said, "Well, I just can't register you boys." We didn't hold any argument. We just turned around and walked on out. We went on home, turned right around and went back. We walked right on past those other fellows -- didn't say a thing to them. He fumbled around a few seconds, then went right on and registered every one of us. He just opened the book, said "Sign your name there." And when we come out, those other guys didn't say a thing. We got in the car and went on our way. We didn't go there raising no Cain. But if those guys had tried to stop us, they were liable to get whipped. That was what was on my mind. We were going to fight if we had to.

From that day I hadn't heard tell of anybody having any problem registering in Royal.

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### Authors:

[Cecelski, David S.](#) <sup>[10]</sup>

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[Franklin County](#) <sup>[11]</sup>

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