

Fleming, Karl: Show Me Life ^[1]

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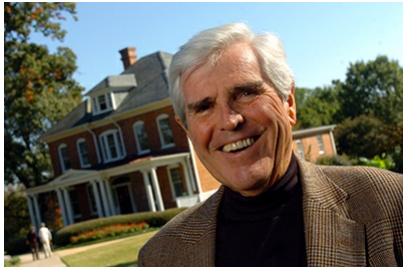


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Karl Fleming: Show me life

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 1/8/2006. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

Karl Fleming recently visited Morehead City to talk about his riveting new memoir, [Son of the Rough South](#).^[3] Raised on a tenant farm in Eastern North Carolina and in the Methodist Orphanage in Raleigh, he became one of Newsweek magazine's star reporters, especially renowned for his bold coverage of the civil rights movement in the Deep South. He lives in California. We had dinner at the Sanitary Fish Market and later talked about one of his book's most unforgettable scenes: his first newspaper job. The place was Wilson, 45 miles east of Raleigh. The time was 1950. He was 22 years old and knew little of the world outside the orphanage. "It was," he told me, "my coming-out party -- to life."



Karl Fleming. Photo by Chris Seward, 2006. To request permission for ~~Kath~~ ~~Essing~~ ~~to~~ ~~publish~~ ~~a~~ ~~print~~, please contact the News & Observer.

All I did was hang around the front of Wimpy's Pool Parlor or the Esquire Grill with this bunch of young guys. So I got to know this cop, Ray Hartis. I rode some with the highway patrolmen and I rode around some with the sheriff's deputy, but He always wore a tan Stetson hat and expensive cordovan shoes and, inevitably, his .38 pistol and his blackjack on his hip. He carried himself as a fierce person. He was not liked by anybody. He was not liked by other cops because he was We would cross the railroad tracks on a warm summer night and black people would be out on the street, talking, hanging out, and as he passed slowly down the street, they would say, "Evening, Mr. Hartis." He would look ahead with this icy He was good at what his role was, which was to keep "N-----town" in line. It was unspoken that that was his role. The power structure didn't want to hear any of the nasty details. They just wanted it done. He knew everybody's secrets. He knew who all the mistresses were. He knew the identity of the one known gay guy in this city, and he would take great pleasure in pointing out to me the black Buick parked on a dark street while this gay guy He also introduced me to the town's two whorehouses. The madams, Mattie Paul and Betty Powell, were his informers. If any strangers showed up with money that it didn't seem like they should have, he would know about it. It was the same with the black bootlegger. He gets to keep selling his whiskey and, in turn, anybody has any money that it doesn't seem like he should have, he would tell Ray. He was completely cynical about the so-called respectable people with the "Jrs" and the "IIs" behind their names, the doctors and lawyers and business people who went to church on Sunday, but then had their mistresses in their fish camps And then there came this night when we pulled up in front of this black guy's shotgun house and got out of the car. He said, "I heard this SOB belongs to the NAA----ingCP." He threw the door open and strode right in, into this modest room w He opened the drawers and started throwing stuff out on the floor and I said, "What are you doing, Ray?" He said, "I'm looking for this SOB's NAACP card." About this time, this old man came out of his bedroom pulling on his overalls and rubbing his eyes and said, "Evening, Mr. Hartis, you got a search warrant?" He knocked the guy to the floor, and said, "That's one side of my god---- search warrant. You want to see the other one?" I was just completely shocked. I had never seen anything like this in my entire life. We got back in the car and I didn't know what to say. Finally, I said, "What did you do that for, Ray? He was just an old man." He said, "You don't understand a damn thing" and launched into a tirade about how if you give them an inch, they take a mile, blah blah blah. And I just had an anger that started right then and has animated my entire life, an anger and an abl It just so happened that my girlfriend's brother was married to this beautiful, sexy redhead who worked as a secretary in Wilson. This secretary began having an affair with Ray. Her husband's brothers found out about it and warned him to sta And then one night, they cornered him out on the edge of town and put a gun on him and led him out to a corn patch and worked him over with an ice pick -- where it counted. I was repelled by Ray, but I felt sorry for him too. I felt, in some way, that he was an outcast, just like I felt I was. He was an outsider and lonely. I was not able to articulate it at that time, but he had been wounded in some way. I also thought, this guy tells it like it is. He has guts to really say what was going on. In other words, he was not a hypocrite. With all of his anger and racism, he was who-the-hell-he-was and unembarrassed about it. I learned a lot about life from him. He showed me what life was really about, not what it appeared on the surface. It wasn't until I was just so shocked by his brazen cruelty that I really knew that I had to get away from him. I believe that Wilson was just a microcosm of everything I saw later in the larger life of presidential politics and the civil rights movement. Pride and chicanery, bravery and cowardice, cynicism and idealism, compassion and cruelty -- everyth

Additional information from NCpedia editors at the State Library of North Carolina :

Karl Fleming lived from August 30, 1927 – August 11, 2012.

Woo, Elaine. "Karl Fleming dies at 84; Newsweek reporter chronicled civil rights struggle." *Los Angeles Times*, August 12, 2012. <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/aug/12/local/la-me-karl-fleming-20120812> ^[4]

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Years:

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