

Lowry, Welton: The Spirit Of Henry Berry Lowry ^[1]

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Welton Lowry: The Spirit Of Henry Berry Lowry

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 6/10/2001. Copyrighted.
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On the night of Jan. 18, 1958, Welton Lowry and hundreds of other Lumbee Indians surrounded a Ku Klux Klan rally near Maxton, 90 miles south of Raleigh in Robeson County. The Lumbee launched barrages of gunfire over the Klansmen's heads and drove the hooded crowd away. Their victory was featured in *Life* magazine and helped inspire an Indian pride movement throughout the United States.

The Klan's leader was James "Catfish" Cole, a former carnival barker and tent evangelist. Since 1956, Cole had been barnstorming the Carolinas, preaching against "race mixing and Communism"--which he made sound like the same thing -- to crowds as large as 15,000.

Routed in a gunfight with an NAACP chapter the previous fall, Cole and the Klan had hoped to redeem themselves in Robeson County. Cole had accused the Lumbee, a third of the county's residents, of not respecting the South's code against interracial relationships. "There's about 30,000 half-breeds in Robeson County, and we are going to have a cross burning and scare them up," Cole boasted.

When Welton Lowry stood up against the Klan, he was following in a family tradition. His great-uncle, Henry Berry Lowry, was the legendary Lumbee "Robin Hood" who protected poor people of all colors against Confederate guerrillas and the Home Guard during the Civil War and Reconstruction. The story of his "Uncle Henry" is told in a popular outdoor drama in Pembroke, 10 miles from Maxton, and was recently the subject of a fine novel, "Nowhere Else on Earth," by Josephine Humphreys.

Now 88, Welton Lowry is a retired educator, farmer and minister. I interviewed him at his home in Pembroke, where a portrait of Henry Berry Lowry hangs over the mantelpiece.

In Welton Lowry's words:



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Catfish Cole had made a statement that he was going to have a meeting and put the Indians in their place. The city manager told Cole's boys we didn't want them to come here. He told them he couldn't protect them. But Cole said they'd already done it. The day of the Klan meeting, I went over to the tobacco barn and made an effigy of Cole. I put on the pants, filled it full of hay and put one of my old shirts on and stuffed it and put in it my car. My wife didn't want me to do it, but me and another man, I drove up there that night. Yes sir, it was the coldest night! When I got up there, I opened the trunk, and I said, "Come here, boys. I want to go back to town and burn this effigy tonight. But if Cole makes us run, I don't want you telling that I he I was sitting in my car, a man a'wedding to get by, and that gun in his pocket was right there in my face. I was trying to bend over to see who it was. He was one of the Klan men. I met a man I knew, and I said, "Come here, Lacy." This man was about that time a car drove up with four blacks. "Listen," they said, "we going to be down the road here. If you need us" -- I saw the guns laying up there in their car -- "let us know."

I didn't think there was going to be any shooting, but the young people took it out of what we had planned. I haven't talked with many people about what the plan was. The plan was, we had some gasoline. And which way the wind was blowing. The gas was there. The man was there to carry it. Our better class of people were involved in it. Our better class. I was principal of the school. Harry Wes was on the board of education. The president of the Normal School was the one that he was. We were supposed to have grabbed us one of Cole's men and made him come get in our car, too. I was to bring one of them to Pembroke. It was out that the boy that delivers Coca-Colas was one of them, and we wanted to find out. We got to see, when here comes one running by, you could have easily grabbed him and put a gun to him and got his rifle. Some of them had rifles. We were supposed to have brought him here, and our job was to take the hood off and see his face. But we didn't have to do it. Our plan was never finalized because of the young people. I don't know who shot first, but it was the young boys -- 16, 18, 20 years old. We older ones, we were going to use that gas, no shooting. After the first shot, I didn't see any blood shed, but honestly, I think somebody got hurt. I know one thing. I went up there Sunday evening to hunt me a cartridge for a souvenir. Couldn't find a one. It was clean. Everybody wanted one. But from the tracks they left. After we ran the Klan off, everybody came back to Pembroke. They were a'hollering and having a time, and I finally decided I'd let them know what I had in my car. We went and got a chain and hung the effigy up and burned it. We burned him. Well, that was the spirit of Henry Berry Lowry.

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