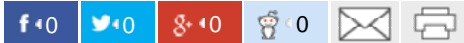




## LOCAL NEWS



# Ocala Rejects 'Prejudice'

**Reporter Thomas W.**

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OCALA - Conversations about race never seem far from the surface in Ocala.

In a barbershop off the downtown square, on a porch stoop across the railroad tracks and on a sandy riverbank, Marion County residents are discussing the validity of statements made by a movie star who recently called into question the area's racial morality.

Actor Wesley Snipes, whose federal tax-fraud trial begins Monday, has argued that Ocala is not a suitable location for a black man to receive justice. His attorneys have tried, unsuccessfully, to move the trial to much larger venues such as Orlando or New York.

"While many Ocala jurors may be fair, substantial pockets of prejudice persist in the Ocala area," Snipes argued in a court document. The document also says Ocala is a "hotbed" of activity for the Ku Klux Klan.

Locals are suspicious of Snipes' motives for such comments.

"I've never seen not one gentleman riding around with a white hood pointed up on his head," said Ernest Nunn, 34, a black man and the owner of Kingdom Kuts barbershop. "I haven't seen anything of that sort."

Matthew "Lincoln" Johnson, a 37-year-old barber at the shop, isn't so quick to discount Snipes' contention.

"Some people will say he's 100 percent right," he said. "You'll get other people who say the courthouse is a magical place and they go for law and order, justice prevails, the scales are even and it's the American way."

The truth, Johnson said, is probably somewhere in the murky middle ground.

Asked whether the Snipes trial has been a topic readily at hand, Johnson let out a laugh.

"Of course," he said. "This is a barbershop."

Sweet Home Ocala

On Wednesday afternoon, Realtor Jeff Hoop sat on the sandy shore of the Oklawaha River casting a fishing line baited with a small chunk of hot dog.

Hoop, a 45-year-old white man, said he has read a newspaper article or two about Snipes, the pending trial and the actor's comments.

"I've lived here since 1974," Hoop said. "I've never seen a demonstration or anything else having to do with the KKK."

Mostly, he said, Ocala is known for thoroughbred racing. Hoop said the people he knows in Ocala like the country atmosphere and think of the city as a good place to raise a family.

"Maybe he knows something about Ocala that I don't know," Hoop said with a chuckle.

The Southern Poverty Law Center, which documents hate group activity, mentions a "Klanstore" in Ocala. A Web site for Klanstore.com provided an Ocala post office box along with an e-mail and phone number from Pennsylvania.

A message sent to the address was returned by someone who wrote that he had nothing to do with the Klanstore and was not from Ocala. He said he was part Jewish and thought someone attached his information to the store out of spite or a bad joke.

The man's information is no longer on the site.

In west Ocala, an area predominantly black since long before the Civil War, Gloria and Essie Weems sat on the front porch of their home with their mother, Irene Kendrick.

"He makes some good movies," Gloria Weems, 49, said of Snipes. "He needs to make some movies so he can pay some taxes."

She said she works hard at a local fast-food restaurant and pays her taxes. Just because Snipes makes movies doesn't exempt him from paying his fair share, she says.

She and her sister, Essie, 55, said they remember a time when they had to walk in the back doors of restaurants and were not allowed to look white people in the eye.

"Back then, yeah," Essie Weems said. "It would have been hard to get a fair trial. But it has changed a whole heap. There used to be real prejudice here, but it has come a long way here in Ocala."

As the conversation continued, the sisters wavered on their contention that the days of racism are over.

Some of the outlying areas of Marion County remain solely white and potentially dangerous for blacks, they said. Hog Valley, in the north county, and Lake Weir, in the south, along with the Ocala National Forest are not places for minorities, both sisters said.

"You don't want to get caught in the forest at night," Essie Weems said.

"Not a black person," Gloria Weems added.

On a hot afternoon last week, along the southern edge of the county, three young women and a man in his 40s drank bottled beer in the sand lot of a bar near Lake Weir.

When approached by a reporter and photographer, the man said he did not want to give his name or appear on camera. The women walked away. When asked about Snipes, the man used a racial slur and said Snipes deserves prison. The women laughed.

#### The Young And The Old

On the front stoop of the Boulevard Motel, a rooming house that offers low-cost weekly and monthly rentals, David Ray Wheat banged away at a severely out-of-tune acoustic guitar.

Between songs by The Charlie Daniels Band and Hank Williams Jr., Wheat, who is white, described himself as "country to the core." He and a few friends passed each other generic cigarettes and cold cans of Budweiser while they contemplated racism in Ocala.

"I am a racist!" red-headed and pale-skinned Thomas James Byrne Jr. yelled across the parking lot.

Then, he reached behind the rotting wooden door of one of the motel rooms and came back pulling a large black man by the arm. Despite racism, Byrne said, this man is his friend. He gave the black man a big hug, smiled broadly and let out a laugh. Later, Byrne said he was only joking about being a racist.

Wheat, 42, said his family has Southern roots and once owned slaves. Still, he said, he has a

half-black stepson and feels no personal prejudices toward any race.

Like many of the men drinking beer and smoking that afternoon, he said he has had run-ins with the law, including at least one trespassing citation. The Ocala courts, he said, continue to work within a broken system; the courts don't work for the people, white or black, forced to deal with that system.

Allen Brown, a 32-year-old black man with pale blue eyes, walked from a room a few doors down and said he agrees with Snipes. It would be more difficult for a black man to get a fair trial in Ocala. But Brown doesn't agree with Snipes' reasoning.

There might not be more racists here than elsewhere, he said, but there is an abundance of older people. The younger generations seem to mix among races more than the old. Wheat and Byrne agreed.

Brown said he has a friend with a dog that spent most of its life around black people. Even now, he said, that dog gets nervous when it sees a white man.

"Some people can be racist just because of the way they were born," Brown said.

Several miles east on Highway 40, closer to downtown Ocala, Sharon Dion works in the main branch of the Marion County public library. Dion, a third-generation Ocala resident who is white, said she remembers the 1960s, when she stayed home from school for a few days. Forced integration brought some threats. Still, she said, Ocala ultimately accepted integration without riots or violence.

Asked about Snipes' contention that he can't get a fair trial here, Dion shook her head.

"I think he will get a fair trial," she said. "He might not think so, but I do."

Dion, 57, complained about traffic and the modern shopping centers that replaced wide-open horse farms, but she said Ocala remains true to the ideal place where she grew up, when she could swim for free in a park called Silver Springs.

In a small renovated schoolhouse a few miles away, Brenda Vereen also remembers swimming in the springs as a younger woman - but for Vereen, the main park was off-limits.

"During my senior year, we still couldn't go to Silver Springs," Vereen said. "We had to go to Paradise Park."

Vereen, the archivist at the Black History Museum of Marion County, stood near a framed black-and-white photograph. Several young black women in bathing suits posed on an entrance sign.

"Paradise Park for colored people," the sign read. "Glass-bottom boats, swimming."

Not all of Marion County's history is racist, Vereen said. She pointed to reference items in the museum that show the county was predominantly black until after the Civil War.

Now, the area surrounding Ocala is home to fewer black residents than the Florida average. Census figures from 2006 show that Marion County is 11.4 percent black, compared with the state at 15.4 percent black. Lake County is 8.6 percent black, and Citrus County is 2.9 percent black. Figures were not available for Sumter County.

Residents 'Opposed To The IRS'

Ben Daniel Jr. has practiced law in Marion County since 1960 and knows a few things about juries.

A judge and lawyers will question all potential jurors in the Snipes case. They will try to weed out anyone who will not be able to make a decision about guilt based solely on the facts.

"That's kind of a dream," he admitted. "You can't get rid of people's personal prejudices. It just doesn't work that way."

Regardless, he said Snipes' attorneys might be a bit short-sighted in trying to move the trial to a larger city. The Internal Revenue Service, Daniel said, is not particularly well thought of in Ocala.

"If Snipes were smart, he'd go ahead with a jury and quit fooling around," Daniel said. "He's liable to get more people here opposed to the IRS than in a metropolitan area."

Daniel said the four-county area where the potential jurors live might be significantly more fair than Snipes thinks - regardless of any possible prejudices.

In the 1960s in Lake County, Daniel said, he represented a black man accused of killing a white man. On the sixth day of trial, Daniel said, the black client demanded to plead guilty, afraid that if he didn't he would get the death penalty.

Afterward, a large white man who had watched the whole trial approached Daniel.

"He had on overalls," Daniel said. "He was a redneck with tobacco in his pocket."

The man called Daniel's client by a racial epithet - then asked why Daniel would let him plead guilty.

"That man was framed," Daniel said, quoting the large white man.

Despite the man's appearance and obvious racism, he listened to the facts, Daniel said. That was more than 40 years ago.

"Lake County has come a long way since then," he said.

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