

MARCINIUS TAYLOR

On April 2, 1938 I became the first Black firefighter. Snow Grigsby was head of the Detroit Citizens Rights Committee. He helped a number of Blacks to take the exam for the Fire Department.

An officer at training school talked about "an explosion that was so powerful it knocked a nigger wench down a block away." All that time I stayed cool.

They didn't know what to do with us. I was sent to the station. The first day when I came to the station people from the neighborhood were picketing the station. All the firemen had come early, and they locked the door so I wasn't able to get in. The police let the crowd get larger and larger. The Mayor got in touch with the Police Commissioner, and the Commissioner came out and.... I stood outside for several hours while the doors were closed. The union fought my becoming a firefighter. At that time we worked 24 hours with 24 off. There was an article in the paper that said, "Negroes are being placed in the Detroit Fire Department where they have to eat and sleep with White men in the manner of real family life. Please help us to right this inhuman...."

In the dormitory it was unheard of for the Blacks to stay with Whites. The captain moved out of his room and moved the other Black and I to his room. We couldn't eat with the rest of the people. In the kitchen we had to use our own plates and utensils. We had to wait till the other officers finished eating. They would sit and start smoking. Then I would go in and make my food.

They wouldn't speak to me for several months when I first started. I got books from the Public Library and would sit and read. Youngsters from the neighborhood would sit and talk with me and go to the store for me.

Once, when we were at a fire, a policeman was taking a report and said to a black woman, "What's your name?" She said, "Mary _____" and he started calling her Mary. I said, "You must be a relative. Don't you ever call anyone by their first name." I was a different type of character. They referred to me as the bad one.