

## **Mayor Ronnie Thompson**

Ronnie Thompson, Macon's first Republican mayor, was born on July 21, 1934 in Augusta, GA (Moore 1-2). His parents were Remus Warren Thompson and the former Mattie Lou Watkins (Moore 1-2). 'Ronnie' Thompson had two older brothers, Kenneth and William, and a younger sister, Janice (Moore 1-2).

Thompson began a family of his own when he married a young woman named Nita in 1952. Then, they had a daughter named Ronita and a son named Johnny (Moore 4). Ronnie's political career soon came between the couple, and they separated in 1972 and officially divorced in 1974. "In Thompson's words, 'She got tired of threats of violence, people throwing bricks at the car with her in it, the children not being able to go any place in peace, the police living in our house...She wanted me to get out of politics. I told her I would remain in it until I accomplished the things I set out to do. The day I qualified for Congress, I came home, and she's never been back since'" (Moore 102-103). In 1975, "Thompson hastily married then twenty-six-year-old Linda Duffey, but the union lasted only a few months. In 1976, he married the former Gloria Milligan" (Savage B1).

"Thompson's father originally sang in a quartet in Augusta, and Ronnie developed similar interests at a young age in part to please the senior Thompson. After he had left the Air Force, Thompson himself sang with a gospel quartet at Robins Air Force Base, and by 1955, having created his own quartet, he was heard on local radio in Macon. In time, he drifted into Country music and made his first such record in 1958" (Rountree A6).

Thompson's first attempt in politics was an unsuccessful race in 1961 to fill a vacancy on the Bibb County Commission. This was an attempt to generate new customers for his own jewelry business he opened in Macon more than it was an actual scheme to enter politics. He reasoned that the publicity from the campaign would expose more people to his new fledging business he opened after leaving Friedman's (Moore 11). However, his second political endeavor was more successful. In 1963, Thompson ran for alderman on the nonpartisan ballot and unseated Bert Hamilton. (Moore 11-12)

Thompson's mentor, Mayor Benjamin Merritt, who first encouraged Thompson to run for alderman soon became Thompson's opponent in the political race for mayor in 1967. In the end, "Thompson unseated Merritt with 14, 732 votes compared to the 13,002 votes Merritt won" (Watson, and Eric Welch A8).

Thompson had many accomplishments as mayor, but race relations were involved in everything he did. He tried, though, to stay out of the race issue by keeping focusing on law and order instead. For instance, he "chaired the Macon City Council Library Committee, which quietly

opened services to African Americans. 'Not a word was said about it. We just did it. No big to-do. No press releases to inflame folks. And we started putting branch libraries in different neighborhoods. Nothing racial about it,' Thompson recalled" ( Campbell 187-191).

Nevertheless, race was an issue in the South, and everyone had an opinion. A black reverend of the community reflected on Thompson's performance as well as a teenager during his terms as mayor. Reverend Julius Hope, leader of the Macon NAACP, "viewed Thompson as ambivalent towards blacks: 'I think Mayor Thompson was a politician of expediency. I really don't think deep down within Ronnie Thompson was a racist.'(Moore 34-35). "Macon lawyer Virgil Adams, who was a teenager at the time of the Thompson administration, alleged that Thompson 'damaged Macon's image. When it got dark, you (blacks) needed to be off the street. Parents wouldn't let us out of the house at night for fear of being locked up, beaten by the police, or shot" (Hyatt 125-135).

Thompson defended his mayoral record on race relations. He said "Race wasn't an issue until my opponent brought it in. My administration built three new hospitals. Jet airport, firehouses, integrated police department, had black personnel in every department. We went eight years without a tax increase or bond issue. I had a biracial committee that met every month. Things like doctor's offices. Black patients had to go in a back door. We got it stopped. And the newspapers had a different edition for black subscribers. My committee talked to them, and they stopped it" (Campbell 187-191).

Thompson made significant other improvements in his community as mayor as well. "He promoted industrial expansion, airport improvements, the upgrading of hospitals, and the completion in 1968 of the \$4.5 million 14,000-seat Macon Coliseum. Buckner Melton said that Thompson, despite his many critics, 'had the vision to support the proper restoration of this great old building.' Libraries and city recreational programs were expanded. Seventy-seven miles of streets were paved, and nondiscriminatory hiring practices were instituted by the city. Thompson pushed for upgrading the Macon police and fire departments, with the number of police having increased from 168 to 242 and firefighters from 181 to 287. Thompson pushed for civil defense and created 'one of the best programs in the state.' His accomplishments were not accompanied by a bond issue or an increase of ad valorem taxes. Yet his positive accomplishments were overshadowed by his flamboyance and his hard-line positions on law-and-order and municipal unionism" (Moore 136-137).

"Thompson advocated decentralization of Georgia state government: He proposed the relocation of the Georgia Department of Health to Augusta to be near the state medical college and the moving of the Department of Public Safety to Macon in the center of the state. He proposed a state takeover of the City of Atlanta if the capital did not reduce the crime rate within six months of inauguration. He favored standardized testing of school teachers to

remove the incompetent. He proposed the legalization of bingo and pari-mutuel betting by local county option” (Savage C1).

All of these accomplishments, however, were overshadowed by his reputation as ‘Machine Gun Ronnie.’ “When racial rioting broke out in Macon on June 20, 1970, Thompson issued ‘shoot-to-kill’ orders to police to stop looting. He drove a National Guard tank onto a Macon elementary school campus to intimidate would-be criminals. He authorized billboards in Macon warning that armed robbers would be ‘shot on sight’” (“Laughing Wolf”).

“In midsummer of 1971, a racial crisis erupted when a black city employee was shot and killed by a white policeman, who a month later was cleared of involuntary manslaughter (Friedman A1). Mayor Thompson imposed a 36-hour curfew after several suspected fire bombings. He fired a carbine in the air, heard over police radio, while he accompanied a police patrol. He further angered liberals by publicly discussing the ‘best type of bullet’ to use against the criminal element. Critics called him ‘Machine Gun Ronnie’, a sobriquet to which he did not object though he never handled a machine gun. In fact, he paid for his campaigns by selling memorabilia containing the name ‘Thompson’ on model machine guns” (“Freedom on Film: Civil Rights in Georgia”).

“Thompson claimed that the Republican leadership which repudiated him was more concerned with control of the party apparatus than in electing a governor. The GOP hierarchy, while it could not win many elections, could still influence federal grants and appointments. Thompson said that he could ‘never fit into that organization’ and because he was threatening the power structure’, the leadership turned on him” (Moore 125).

Thompson wrote a column for the weekly *Macon Herald* and hosted a radio talk show before such exchanges were commonplace on the airwaves. Subsequently, he wrote for the *Macon News* until 1983, when it merged with the *Macon Telegraph* (Moore 137-138).

Thompson is a featured artist on the CD *America Speaks from the Heart* by Centurion, a tribute to the victims of the September 11, 2001 attacks, and the American military personnel in the War on Terror.

In recent years, Thompson has been a counselor at the River Edge Behavioral Health Center in Macon.

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