

Written by Jay Luster

THE
**ISAAC
POPE**
CENTURY

Part II

Potter Photography & Design

“People need to know we just need to stop doing the things we know is wrong and start doing the things we know is right.”

– Isaac Pope

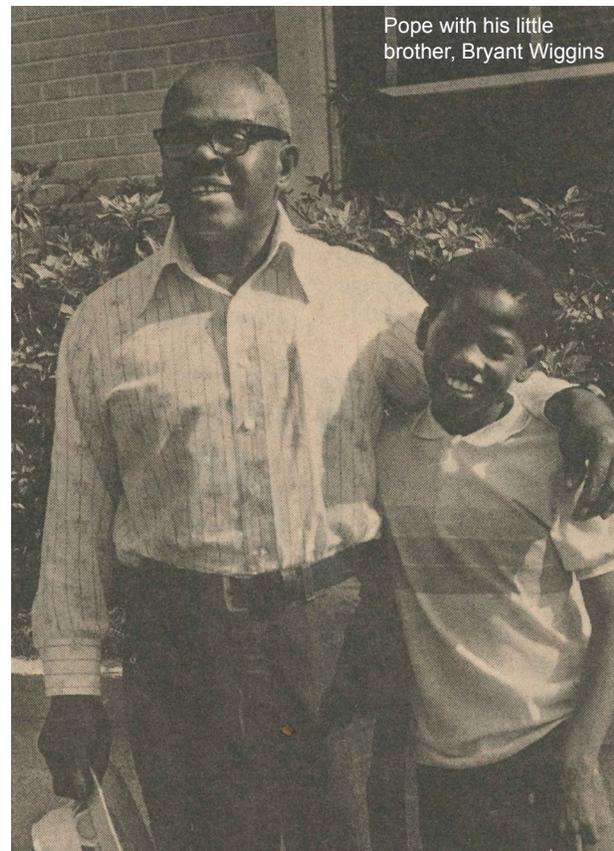
On December 17, 1917, Isaac Pope was born in the United States and into a world much different from our own. World War I was raging, and America, despite its deep-seated isolationism, had committed to joining the allied powers in their fight against Germany. For the impoverished, black sharecroppers living in the rural South, it wasn't the country which was problematically isolated. It was the very real segregation that was preventing them from enjoying even the smallest piece of the American dream. In 1917, Southern, black farmers may have owned a mule and very little else. When the harvest ended, they split the profit from the crops with the landowner, minus the price of seeds and tools. They also paid the local merchants for necessary goods, like food and clothing that they had purchased on credit throughout the year, from their share of the profit. With little access to information about the farm, the farmers had no idea if the landowner or the merchants were playing fair with the prices they were being charged. With the vagaries of harvest prices, the landowner had all the power, which kept the sharecroppers in virtual slavery. Landowners controlled their American dream and were disincentivized to give up that control.

In those days, much like today, the American dream was quite simply a job with a living wage. With reliable work, a family could rent or own a decent place to live, eat well, and live with a modicum of financial security. The only security sharecroppers might have had was a shotgun to hunt for food and to possibly defend themselves from the Nightriders, if they came calling. Pope grew up in a time that is hard to imagine these days. While racism still exists today, back then, it was codified into laws and hidebound by tradition. On the day Pope was born, every person of color in the South had either been a slave or was a first or second-generation freedman. Jim Crow laws, along with legal segregation, rendered the US Constitution's Equal Protection Clause meaningless. Like today, where you lived was the deciding factor in the quality of your education

and how far you might go. Clearly on the bottom rung of the socioeconomic ladder, the children of sharecroppers received the worst education and were the least likely to finish school. Coming from that background, it is little wonder there was almost no upward mobility.

When World War II began, a million American men of color joined the armed forces to fight for their country. Isaac Pope and a vast majority of black men joined, because they hoped the segregated world they were leaving would be changed for the better by a country grateful for their service. They were wrong. While it was largely the same when they returned, they were different. Changed by a war that touched every part of their world, people of color regrouped and prepared to try to end racism or, at the very least, end the legal barriers keeping them from enjoying the fruits of the freedom they fought to preserve. It wasn't long before black people began to realize the need to join the Civil Rights movement. Pope helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapter in Kinston, North Carolina, and remained active until age began taking its toll upon his daily activities. Participation in the NAACP movement was dangerous and could be deadly. The same fear of the Nightriders that Isaac's mom warned him about, nearly 30 years earlier, was unchanged. With the majority of national public opinion beginning to side with black rights, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) fought back with the same tactics they used for almost a century – terrorism. Isaac, despite the danger, signed-up people for the NAACP, participated in voter registration drives, and helped organize and march in picket lines in front of segregated businesses.

I met with Mr. Pope twice. The first time was after his 100th



Pope with his little brother, Bryant Wiggins



First Sgt. Isaac Pope, retired, is pictured on the far right in this 1945 picture of the 989th Field Artillery-Battery B. The unit fought in Normandy, Northern France; Rhineland; and Ardennes, Central Europe. They served 29 months on the front lines. They were trapped and surrounded for six days and nights in "The Battle of the Bulge" before help arrived, but fought courageously and won. The whole black outfit received the Distinguished Unit Badge Award from President Franklin Roosevelt, five bronze stars for bravery and good conduct medals.

Pope with his Battery in World War II, *Kinston Free Press*



birthday party, and the second time was after the January 2018 issue of *City to Country Magazine* was released that contains Part I of his story. I found him to be engaging, intelligent, and serious. He has a dignified humbleness and self-deprecating sense of humor and seemed honestly baffled about why he is receiving the amount of attention that has come his way over the last few years. His great-niece, Patricia Harris, was present at both interviews and was a great help. Below is a combined version of our conversations. Because the interviews overlapped, I organized them into one article, but I did not retouch Isaac's or Patricia's words, other than to remove redundancies. I hope you enjoy this as much as I did.

JAY LUSTER: Hi, Mr. Pope. Thank you so much for agreeing to speak with me. You've lived through so much that I hardly know where to begin. Could you tell me about what you see going on in our society today?

ISAAC POPE: We all know what's happening – the thing that keeps us, as a people, from acting the way we supposed to be. That's what I'm thinking about. Now, coming up to it, we've got a ways to go. Right on! There are ways to fight it and ways to work with it. There are ways to fight it, to get there.

LUSTER: You're talking about racism? What do you think we should do?

POPE: Stop doing the things that's hurting us. Every time we do something, it hurts us as a people, together. It's not so much that we know it and admit it. It's that we done it.

LUSTER: How did you fight it?

POPE: Sometimes, some of us cry about it, some go to jail,

all sorts of crazy things you've got to do. But we keep right on doing it over and over and over, wondering why it keep on happening.

LUSTER: I know you were active in the NAACP. What did you do there?

POPE: (Laughter) I didn't do nothing, if the rest of them were laying around doing nothing.

LUSTER: Note: Patricia showed Pope his *City to Country Magazine* article.

PATRICIA HARRIS: Look at this, Uncle.

POPE: Good gracious. I don't know where you get all that write-up on.

LUSTER: I got this from you, from Patricia, and from Paula Caplan.

POPE: It's amazing how it gets around. (Laughter)

LUSTER: Note: As she looked at Isaac's picture in the magazine, Patricia continued.

HARRIS: That's a good-looking man, I must say.

POPE: (Laughter) That's solid, ain't it?

LUSTER: Chuck Berry wrote a song called "Brown Eyed Handsome Man."

POPE: That's it. I'm satisfied.

HARRIS: (Laughter) You're satisfied?

POPE: Yes, indeed. I don't know what I done to deserve all this.

HARRIS: My mama used to say, "If I can help somebody as I travel along, if I can help somebody with a word or song, if I can help somebody from doing wrong, my living shall not be in vain." This magazine is showing you that you have touched peoples' lives.

LUSTER: Note: The above quote was originally by Mahalia Jackson.

POPE: Yep, I can see it. I guess it's been worthwhile. It's something to think about. It's deep stuff. You go through everything, trying to reach some conclusions, but there's no end to it. Oh, my lord, there's no end to it.

LUSTER: Note: Patricia excused herself to go get Mr. Pope his lunch.

LUSTER: Mr. Pope, will you tell me about your experience in the war?

POPE: Well, that's a big one, another big one. There's a whole lot to it. I was in so much of that stuff I was tied up in, it's pitiful. Back in those days, they had to keep us separated out. They had a big problem. They didn't even know how to use black soldiers in the war. It confused them. The government had to decide whether to put black troops into the war or not. Back then, slavery hadn't really cleared this place far enough for people to understand each other and how to work it out. So, they had a hard time trying to put it together where'd make sense.

LUSTER: So, you were in the 969th?

POPE: Well, yes. Before that, I had to hang around and wait to be called. I had to stay real close, waiting for them to call. You had to hurry up and wait. (Laughter)

LUSTER: (Laughter) That's how the military was when I was in too. You hurry up and wait.

POPE: (Laughter) Months and months and months.

LUSTER: So, you fought in the Battle of the Bulge?

POPE: That is what they finally ended up naming it. They didn't call it that at the time. No, they didn't.

LUSTER: You were in Bastogne?

POPE: They got hot fighting in there, and there was some hard fighting in there. They had a hard time advancing. You couldn't tell if you were moving or not. There was just so much stuff going on.

LUSTER: It was cold and snowy, and you were surrounded...

POPE: Yeah, man. Good God almighty, yes, indeed. The 333rd were our buddies. They got split off every now and then. Somehow or another, they had officers who were, I always felt, more on the ball than ours was at that time. They'd get the jump on information that you needed to know about. They were smart enough, somehow or another, to get it.

LUSTER: What happened to them?

POPE: They got trapped. There's not a lot I can say about that. They came out, but they didn't come out in big, flying colors.

LUSTER: Note: The 333rd got trapped and surrounded. They lost half of their company and many were captured by the Schutzstaffel (SS), and then, because they were black, they were murdered and their bodies defiled. It's little wonder Mr. Pope didn't want to talk about them.

LUSTER: And what did you do?

POPE: I was in the 969th, which was one of the new units. They had us branched off into batteries, Battery B, C, and D. I was in Battery B. I made First Sergeant around the time of that mess. They made me First Sergeant, but I don't know how in the world that happened. I could never remember myself doing a whole lot of nothing, except staying out of sight.

LUSTER: (Laughter)

POPE: My commanding officer, it was all he could do to tell us what was going on, how we was moving and everything. We'd take what we learned from him as far as we could go, but there was so much going on. Sometimes, we were on the run, retreating and trying to stay out of the way of the enemy. It was just a terrible thing.

LUSTER: Did you actually see the enemy?

POPE: Off in the distance, yeah, off in the distance. We never made no close contact with them. Somehow, they kept us away. There is one thing. They worked very hard to keep us from getting involved head-on.

LUSTER: You were artillery. Your job wasn't to engage with the enemy directly.

POPE: Right. Now, you're talking. Our fighting come under that [artillery action] and automatically kept us apart from the enemy.

LUSTER: Note: At this point, Patricia returned to the room with a tray of food for Pope.

HARRIS: You hungry, Uncle?

POPE: I can't get hungry like I used to. I don't know what it is, but I can't get hungry, if I wanted to.

LUSTER: Note: Pope returned to the subject of war and continued.

POPE: I never could have time to sit down and eat a meal. It's the same thing here every day.

LUSTER: Note: As Pope ate, he looked like he was not enjoying it. At first, I thought it was because his hand was shaking, but he said that it was dry and hard to eat and was the same thing every day. He ate a few bites of the meat, ignored the green beans, and drank half of the orange juice, but he was interested in his coffee. While he ate, he switched the subject to his mother and her cooking.

POPE: I think, if the food was better, I'd eat more. My mama, back in those days, she had everything on her. It was a hard time, because back in those days, we didn't have any money. With the little bit we could get, we had to deal with it as best we could. It was a time.

LUSTER: Note: Pope paused to drink some of his juice, then switched back to the subject of war.

POPE: We didn't suffer none for no food, because we ate beans and couldn't get away from it. (Laughter) That's what we had to eat like every meal. Here come them beans. They had us trapped in there, and we ate them things every meal. I got tired of looking at them.

LUSTER: You ate beans every meal when you were trapped in Bastogne?

POPE: (Laughter) I'm gonna tell you the truth. Not every day, but every time you turn around, you could see them things were for you, you know? Every day, the same kind of beans. They stayed around for a long time.

LUSTER: Note: Isaac paused to eat a bit more, then continued.

POPE: Mama, she had a way of cooking them anyhow, whether you wanted them or not.

LUSTER: So, you ate beans your whole life? First your mother made you eat them, then the army made you eat them?

POPE: Well, that wasn't quite my whole life, but I did eat a lot of them.

HARRIS: Back then, how much did a loaf of bread cost?

POPE: I don't remember, but mama would send me to the store with a pocket full of change.

HARRIS: And they delivered your ice?

POPE: Yeah, you could hear him coming from a long way off. "ICE MAN!"

HARRIS: And they delivered milk too?

POPE: Yeah, they'd leave it on the porch, and you'd leave your bottles on the porch for when he come back.

HARRIS: When did you stop going to school?

POPE: That's a good question. I stopped going to help Mama and Daddy on the farm.

HARRIS: So, you didn't finish high school?

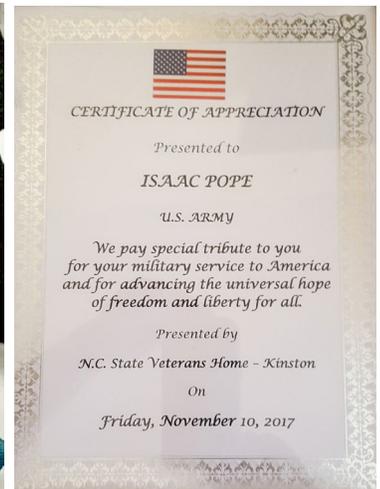
POPE: No, no, no, not by a long shot. I was in high school, but didn't finish.

HARRIS: So, like the 10th grade?

POPE: Yeah, something along in there.



Joseph Friedman, Photographer



HARRIS: Did you have books to study by?

POPE: Well, there was some controversy over the books. Our books was out of date all the time. We got books from the other people, but they had lawsuits about that.

HARRIS: Back then, did you play ball, like basketball or baseball?

POPE: Well, we did, but not together. We was segregated, hard segregated. You had to abide by it, or you'd get punished.

LUSTER: What do you mean by punished? What would happen?

POPE: Well, they had all kinds of ugly ways of doing. If you did certain things, they'd cut you off. That's the way they'd do it. They'd cut you off from the freedom you was enjoying. If they thought you were enjoying it, they'd stop you. You couldn't go here without permission.

LUSTER: Permission from who?

POPE: All over the place. It was the law, Jim Crow. You had to make sure you were in your place. You had to concentrate to make sure you were walking on the right side of the road. If you happen to be on the wrong side, somebody's gonna insult you. Some law officer, he gonna pull you just like if you was driving on the wrong side of the road. That's just the way it was.

LUSTER: Did you ever get arrested?

POPE: No, I thought I was gonna run into that. My mother was scared to death I was gonna run into that,

get locked up. That's what she was afraid of. But thank goodness, I went all the way through, and it didn't happen.

HARRIS: Uncle, what about back then, not being able to go into places like Walgreens, eat at places, and if you went in, you had to go in the back way?

POPE: That was a red-hot issue back then. Anything we do, we had to watch how we do it. Mama kept abreast of that pretty close and kept us safe.

HARRIS: What about after you were grown and your mama had died?

POPE: Well, I had to make sure I followed the rules. If the sign said "No Blacks Allowed" and I couldn't go in, then I made sure and didn't go in. It was like that all over town.

HARRIS: But back then, they didn't say black. They said Negro.

POPE: Yes. It was just tiptoe living, and I don't know how we got by. Mama, she preached to us so much about how to behave. I'd get mad. My brother, he was hot tempered. He'd get in trouble in a minute, and they kept him in jail all of the time. I never did get like him.

LUSTER: What did he do to be put in jail?

POPE: Well, he didn't like being insulted. Someone say something to him, he likely to say something right back at him. He wouldn't take nothing off nobody. He'd fight them.

LUSTER: So, later, you joined the service. What was it like when you came back?

POPE: Well, everything was drained out. You got to where you had to start all over again.

HARRIS: Were you able to find a job?

POPE: No. That was the next punishment that they had on us.

HARRIS: At that time, you and Nita weren't married yet?

POPE: No.

HARRIS: So, what did you do when you came back? Your mama was still living. Did you stay with her and help out on the farm?

POPE: Yes.

LUSTER: So, you went into the Army to get off the farm, but after you got back and couldn't find work, you had to go back to the farm?

POPE: Yes.

HARRIS: So, when you and Aunt Nita got married, you stayed with your mother for a little while?

POPE: For a little while. We had to do it. We had nowhere to go. It weren't too long before we moved, I'll tell you that. I did side jobs, like cleaning yards for people.

HARRIS: This was before Dupont. That was your last job?

POPE: Yes, that's how we did it.

HARRIS: Aunt Nita finished high school?

POPE: Yes, she did. She didn't have near the trouble I did.

HARRIS: Why do you think it is Aunt Nita didn't have it so hard?

POPE: Well, it was the color of her skin is one thing. She was light skinned, so a lot of people thought she was white. But that carried a lot of pressure.

HARRIS: So, back then, with Aunt Nita having such a fair complexion, how did that make it for you? Did they sometimes think that she was white?

POPE: Yes, that was the problem. They thought she was white. When I had a job, I had to be real careful, because they thought she was white, it would make it real difficult on me. They would watch me. I'd have to watch every little

thing I do, everything I'd say. I was watched real close. I sure hope those days will never come back, never, never, never, no more, not in this country, but I don't know though.

LUSTER: When did you start noticing things getting better?

POPE: Well, along in there, we'd go to buy something, and they'd treat us nicer. They'd try to make us feel good. That's when things started to get a little better. I think this was in the '50s. It was in the '50s, because things started advancing a little bit at that time. You could tell things were beginning to change.

LUSTER: Why do you think things started to change?

POPE: That's a good question. Let me put it this way. If they hadn't of changed, this place would have turned into a monster, a living monster. Kinston and all these little, old towns would have turned into monsters, because they would have taken things on their own, do things their own way, spite and all that kind of stuff. Everything would have come to the forefront.

LUSTER: So, you think there would have been violence?

POPE: Yes, I know it would've been. There would have been no other way around it. That's why they worked so hard. They worked hard to keep that from coming around.

LUSTER: Is that why you joined the NAACP?

POPE: Yes, absolutely. That's the thing what pushed me into it. Back then, I didn't know nothing about it. I heard people talking about it, but I didn't know nothing about it.

LUSTER: So, when you were with the NAACP, you picketed in front of segregated businesses?

POPE: Yes.

LUSTER: Was that a scary thing to do?

POPE: I never had no trouble, but they'd stand there and watch you, so you knew it was dangerous. Sometimes, we would just stand there and look at the business. Other times, we'd picket. Different groups had different assignments. Those were sad days around here. We just didn't know what was going to take place. Fortunately, no ugly mess did break out. We got by without that. There was a lot of talk about it, but it never did get out of control.

HARRIS: Do you think things are better now, Uncle?

POPE: It's hard for me to give you the right kind of answer for that. I still feel uncomfortable. Things still ain't right. I don't think the whole thing's got settled. There's still a whole lot of things still unsettled. Ain't gonna be no hurry-up. It's gonna take a long time to get settled.

LUSTER: Do you think we're going in the right direction, or do you think we're going backwards?

POPE: I think we're going backwards now, because we're getting too much involved in this violence and stuff. That ain't good at all.

LUSTER: Do you mean like what happened in Charlottesville?

POPE: Yes, it ain't leveled off yet. We ain't got around to talking to each other too well.

HARRIS: I think the kids now, they don't see that fear, Isaac's fear. They feel like they can say what they want to say and can express themselves without fear.

LUSTER: Did you ever think you'd see a black president?

POPE: No. I'll be honest with you, no. No, I thought we had a lot of ways of time, I really did, because things are getting back ugly all the time.

LUSTER: What did you think of Obama?

POPE: Well, I thought he was going to be the man who would pull the job. He fooled me. I don't think he did quite enough [for the black community].

LUSTER: What do you think of Donald Trump?

POPE: Well, he's a man who's telling the truth about himself. I think he's telling the honest truth about who he is and who he's gonna be. He's telling it right to start with. When you get out there and everybody likes you, what else you trying to do? You win over everybody, and everybody like what you do, you can watch out.

LUSTER: So, you like him?

POPE: Let me put it this way. No, not for no president. He ain't nothing but a terrible person.

LUSTER: Do you think it was tough for Obama to be president just because he was black?

POPE: Yes, absolutely. Any black man in America, this America, that's been living as long as we've been living in here and hasn't woke up to what life is like here, I believe there's deep trouble down the road. It's coming. Now, it might all change, boom. Who knows? What's people gonna do if it's like that? What are they gonna do, go crazy?

LUSTER: Note: In May of 1919, my father was born, 16 months after Isaac Pope. Going in, I thought speaking with Mr. Pope would be a little like touching my father's history. However, what quickly became clear is that Isaac's history is not the history my father grew up with. While Isaac's stories about the ice man and milkman were exactly as my father described, the rest sounds like it could've been from two different countries. Perhaps that is the best way to look at it, because there's no question that the sharecroppers living in the rural South had an experience as unlike my father's as is imaginable. America has changed, mostly for the better, but if we don't heed Isaac Pope's warnings, we are very likely to backslide to the dark past that obviously colors his every waking thought and probably his dreams as well.

Thank you for reading!

Once again, I would like to thank the extraordinary Paula Caplan, Photographer Joseph Friedman, Patricia Harris (Mr. Pope's great-niece), Elle Ish, Leah Reise, Terri Bassett, Tammy KC Heyges, and Lisa Snyder for their help, encouragement, and support.

I would also like to thank Mr. Isaac Pope for allowing this peek into his world and for giving me the opportunity to write about it.

For more information on Paula Caplan, please visit the following sites:

www.paulajcaplan.net/

www.feministvoices.com/paula-caplan/

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