

Appling pioneering black heritage tours

By Herb Sparrow

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. — Advice from a salesman started J.D. Appling on a road that led to a new hometown and to the forefront in developing black heritage tours.

The man, an airline computer salesman, was visiting Appling at his full-service travel agency in Beaumont, Texas.

"He told me to always go to your natural market," Appling remembers. "As I began to become more travel wise, I realized what he was saying. You have a natural market there; you are black and you do very well with planning tours.

"So I started researching the black heritage aspect," Appling said.

This was at the same time that Appling was converting his travel agency, The Travel Scene, into a tour company.

"A NAACP youth group was my first black history tour," Appling said. "We did a tour of the South and it went over very, very well. It was kind of a springboard from that point."

Appling also began to see that black heritage was "not just a black person market. It's history, American history."

One of the things that helped him realize the broader appeal of black heritage was a 26-day tour for Europeans that he ran for a Houston company.

"They wanted to know 'Where did this man (Martin Luther) King walk?' and 'What was this man King about?' It startled me. I realized this is a market for more than just black people."

Appling sat down during a slow period at his company and within two-and-one-half weeks mapped out a number of black heritage tours.

He used Birmingham as a center because that was where most of the volatile civil rights events happened.

"I fanned out from there like wings," he said. "It was amazing.

When I called one person and started talking about it, the idea was so new and exciting by the time I called the next person down the line they had already been called by the first person I had talked to. It began building and snowballing, it just took off."

The Travel Scene is offering 11 black heritage tours of varying lengths during 1994 within an area roughly bounded by Detroit, St. Louis, Dallas, New Orleans and Atlanta. All of the tours originate in Birmingham.

"When you go to Kinglsey Plantation and see the slave quarters, that is very emotional," he said. "When you go to Detroit and walk through a site that is like it was on the underground railroad,

with rough terrain and taped dogs howling in the woods, that is very emotional."

The interest in black heritage tours also caused Appling to make another major decision, to move his base of operation from Beaumont, where he had grown up, to Birmingham, where he didn't know anyone.

"My wife and I prayed about it and

decided to move to Birmingham," Appling said. "It was a move of faith."

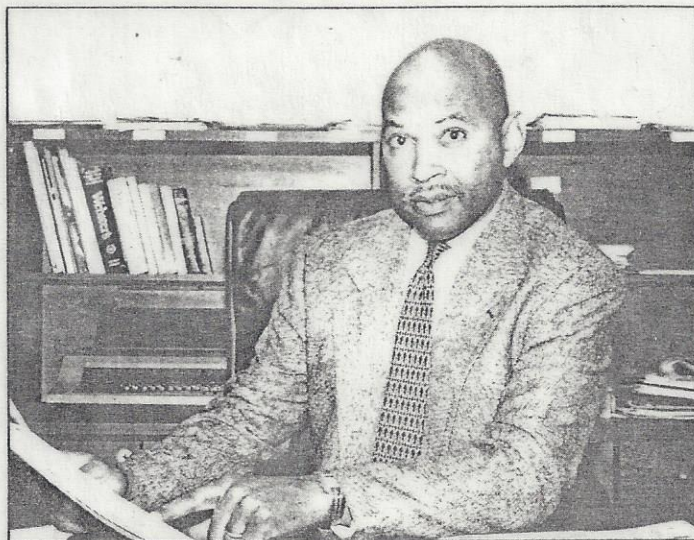
In addition to Birmingham being a natural center for black heritage tours, Appling also felt there was a lack of local receptive tour operations.

"There was a void that existed here and if you are the first to go in and fill a void, you normally are the one most successful," he said.

Appling also has seven local tours of Birmingham. "These are tours of Birmingham, period. Everything is touched, it is not black or white."

The Travel Scene also operates as a cruise agency and Appling hopes he can combine his black heritage tours with cruises up the east coast in the future.

Appling says he is a stickler for details and that trait helped him learn the travel industry. After graduating from Stephen F. Austin



J.D. Appling combined his ability for planning tours with his deep feelings for black heritage to become a leader in developing black heritage tours.

State University in Beaumont, Appling's first job was with a life insurance company.

Frustrated with the lack of opportunity for advancement, he began promoting concerts on the side. Through this, he met the business manager for entertainer Ray Charles and eventually got a job as Charles' road manager.

"I traveled through 18 countries and just about every state in the U.S.A. and that led me into the

travel business," he said.

After tiring of the rigors of constant travel, Appling returned home to Beaumont and began selling travel on a commission basis for a local travel agency.

"I really homed in and learned as much as I could at the agency," Appling said. "I listened and read and taught myself the computers. I knew a good bit about it and I had a good feel for it when I went into this."