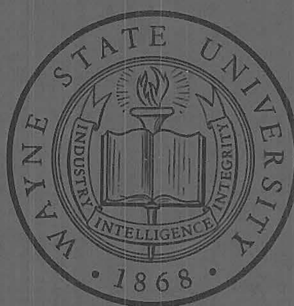
Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs

ORAL INTERVIEW

MRS. GERALDINE BLEDSOE

NORMAN McRAE, INTERVIEWER

1970



Wayne State University
Detroit, Michigan

ORAL INTERVIEW

B: Mrs. Geraldine Bledsoe, Interviewee

M: Norman McRae, Interviewer

Date: 1970

M: Mrs. Bledsoe, what was the period 1935 to 1945 like, especially for Negroes in Detroit?

B: Well, the period 1935 to 1945 was a period, I would say, of great struggle. This was the period, of course, of the organizing of the factories, the labor movement was in a very aggressive period of organizing, and there was, of course, within the labor movement, there was a tremendous struggle on the part...division on the part of Negro workers as to whether they wanted to go into the labor unions or not. This was the first opportunity, with the coming of the CIO, that all workers in a factory or an institution were invited to become a part of the labor movement. And the Negro workers, since they had been excluded for so many years, by the American Federation of Labor, really had no confidence in the sincerity of the labor movement at this time. And so, perhaps, one of the significant things was the struggle of those people who understood that the Negro had to take his place in the labor movement, to get them to understand that this was a movement of which they had to be a part. And so, when you had, for instance, the Ford Motor Company, I remember particularly when they were out there, for instance, in the...Negro workers were, as you know, concentrated largely in the foundries and in the laboring jobs in all of the automobile plants, particularly in the foundries. And I remember very well that they stayed in the foundries, you know, casting their lot with the company. And while the struggle was going on outside, a large number of them remained inside. And a good many Negroes in the community, professional people and all, encouraged Negroes to resist the labor movement, because of the long history of exclusion from the labor movement. But finally, working with the union, working with the men in the community, working with their wives, especially, because they were particularly resistant to having their husbands go into the movement, we finally were able to get the Negro moving into the labor unions. And, of course, without the movement of the Negro into the unions, they could not have succeeded as well as they did. It was a period, of course, of uncertainty, as far as

work was concerned. There was considerable unemployment. The old traditional patterns of the low level jobs, low paying jobs, the service occupations, the laboring jobs in the factories, the laboring jobs in construction, all of this characterized this particular period. We had there a budding, of course, civil rights movement, a movement toward equal employment opportunity, a struggle toward the passage of a law in Michigan, which was finally culminated in 1955, but the struggle was beginning during this period, and had tremendous impetus, of course, from the first Presidential Executive Order, Executive Order 8802, issued by President Roosevelt, after the threatened march on Washington. And in Michigan, I think this took hold extremely well, and the period 1941 to 1955 when the law was passed, was a tremendous period of activity on the part of liberals, of the Negroes with their rising expectations toward becoming a real part of the economic life of Detroit and Michigan, as well as a part of the social and cultural life. I think it was a period of expansion of ideas and ideals, and a period of a great deal of cooperation between the liberal community and the Negro community in helping them to reach their aspirations. There was increasing employment. You had the free public employment agency that had been...had gone into action, unemployment insurance in 1937. Perhaps one of the most significant things during that period, of course, was the unemployment insurance that came into existence. If you remember, Michigan passed its law in 1936, that qualified Michigan to become part of the Unemployment Insurance System, where workers who were unemployed through no fault of their own were able to draw benefits against those employers for whom they had worked, who were required to pay taxes against the hazards of unemployemnt. And so, and the free public employment office was set up, because the law provided that the Unemployment Insurance had to be paid through a free public employment office. And that's one of the most significant things about this free public employment service, was the early movement. Part of the by products of the idealism of the Roosevelt administration was the early movement in the employment services, especially in Michigan, and some other liberal states in the nation, toward working for equal employment opportunity, because when those offices came into existence, it was really a stunning and startling and disheartening thing to see employers asking for workers on the basis of race and color and nationality and religion and complexion within the white group, and complexion within the Negro group, and all this kind of discrimination based on all kinds of things that had nothing to do with the person's ability to do the job. And I think this was

one of the most significant things that happened during that period, was the growing feeling that a man's religion, and a man's race, man's color, a man's nationality, didn't have anything to do with has capacity to perform. And so we developed, for instance, one expression that we referred to in the employment service system of the non-performance factors, meaning those factors that employers used to exclude people that had nothing to do with their ability to perform. Well, that movement, of course, which culminated, actually, in Michigan with the 1955 Fair Employemnt Practices Act, which forbade discrimination based on race, creed, color, national origin, ancestry, and went on, as you very well know, to actually culminate into the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It became a part of a nationwide movement toward making employment, employment opportunities more inclusive and based on a person's real capacity to do the job, and without regard to his race, creed, color, national origin, or ancestry. And, you know, of course, today we talk about it without regard to sex. And without regard to age, except where age may be a factor that interferes with the performance of the job.

M: Another question. What do you remember about the Civil Rights Federation, or do you remember anything about it? It was closely concerned with Reverend Baldwins, Reverend Nocks, a gentleman by the name of Jack Raskin. Do you remember anything about their activities during this period?

B: Well, I remember first the Civil Rights Congress, and then, I think, it merged into the Civil Rights Federation, that, perhaps the forerunner, actually, of both of these was the Metropolitan Detroit Council on Fair Employment Practices. That was perhaps the first organized movement, specifically toward employment opportunity.

M: What year was that?

B: That was organized about the same year as the first Executive Order, in 1942. President Roosevelt's Executive Order was 1941. The Metropolitan Detroit Council on Fair Employment Practices was organized about '41 or '42, and the persons that you mentioned, like Jack Raskin, was extremely active in that. This organization really sort of broke apart on the shoals of "the communist struggle," as almost every organization, communism or anti-communism. And the Civil Rights Congress, as I remember it, and then the Civil Rights Federation, where...state-wide federation that came into existence later, which culminated into the organization state-wide, it culminated into the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1955.

M: Do you know anything - I think I've asked you this, about Baldwins, Nocks, and Raskin????? So, I'll skip that one and ask you this one. How effective was the NAACP during this period? -1935 to 1945.

B: Well, I would say the NAACP perhaps, had one of its most...it was one of its most effective periods. It had, I believe during this period, the highest membership in its history. I think although we had about 150,000 Negroes in Detroit at that time, the membership in the NAACP passed the 25,000 mark under Dr. James J. McClindon, and it was a very cohesive strong organization under his leadership, later under the Reverend Charles Hill, you remember, this was the period of the...within those years came the period of the Sojourner Truth struggle over housing, and during that period, Reverend Hill was the President of the NAACP, and gave extremely effective and strong leadership in this drive toward equal opportunity in housing, and especially the struggle over Sojourner Truth, where the city administration wavered back and forth, Jeffries was the mayor, at that time, and it wavered back and forth. The council would meet one time and the Sojourner Truth would be for Negroes, and the next time would be for whites. It was, of course, built in a neighborhood that was on the edge of both the middle-class white and the middle-class Negro community, and neither community wanted it there, because they felt that it would downgrade the neighborhood. And this is where a very personality that had a great deal to do with the labor struggle, with the civil rights struggle came to the fore in this particular situation, and that was Judge - Justice George Edwards, who at that time, was a member of the Common Council. And I remember very dramatically this meeting in the Common Council when all the people in the neighborhood of Sojourner Truth came down and crowded in, and on one side you had Negroes, and on the other side you had the predominantly Polish community, who were frightened and uninformed and acted, I think, out of their fears, and acted out of lack of substantial leadership from their, I'd say, from their priests. They were afraid of the old cliche that the property values would go down if Negroes moved in. Now I remember this Common Council meeting where, one by one, the Councilmen capitulated to the demands of the people out there that no Negroes be allowed to live there. And one by one, the Councilmen bowed, and the Mayor bowed, and said that it would go for white people, Negroes wouldn't live there, when this one lone councilman who at that time looked very much like a sophomore in college, he looked so young, he said "Well, I voted that this housing program should go to Negroes in the beginning,

because they need it. The Negro war workers" - it was for war workers, you remember - "Negro war workers need this housing. I voted for it and I stand by my vote." And when the Council broke up, they had to escort him, policemen had to surround him and escort him to the upper floor to their private chambers on the upper floor, to keep him from being really attacked by the mob. If you'll remember, of course, the Council changed its vote and the property did go for the occupancy of Negroes. But the NAACP gave extremely good leadership, I would say it was one of the most cohesive and strongest periods of the NAACP in terms of leadership. That is not to disparage what the NAACP has done since that time, but there have been many more competing organizations, it has not claimed the loyalty of the???? membership, as it did at that period. The small membership people. We didn't have anything like the Freedom Fund dinner that raised large sums of money, so it depended on those two and three and five dollar memberships, and meant that you had to touch the people. It was very highly organized... the membership drives were highly organized, and you had people touched personally to get these many two dollar Memberships to get, as I have said, the largest number of members NAACP has ever enjoyed. I think it has never gotten to the numbers that it had during that period.

M: Another question was, "How effective was the American Civil Liberties Union during that period?"

B: Of the American Civil Liberties Union, I'm sorry to say, I do not have a very clear and definite memory. I know in my mind the American Civil Liberties has always held a very distinct place for its meaning, but for its activity during that period, it does not come back to me very clearly. It may have been that I was just not as closely associated as I might have been with it.

M: Do you remember the National Congress, the Detroit Branch?

B: Yes, I remember it. I was not too close to it. I went to a good many of its meetings, but I know it was a vigorous organization that claimed the attentions of young people, especially young Negro leaders, and...as well as whites. And it was considered at that time, of course, as kind of far out and kind of radical, and I suppose in this day you might not say...might not speak of it as being radical, but for that time it was considered very radical. It was very outspoken, and very vigorous in its position of equality of opportunity for Negroes, and I think some of the members who were very active got a little bit tagged with the too liberal brush, I suppose.

But I think it played a very specific and a very definite role in raising the aspiration levels of Negroes, of making them feel that they could make their way in this democratic society, and that they had to be vigorous and uncompromising and demanding in order to find their place.

M. You spoke of Reverend Hill. Would you like to add any other comments, anything to say about him, because...the reason why I ask this is that, throughout the...there are 94 manuscript boxes in the Civil Rights Congress Collection at the Labor Archives at Wayne State University, and throughout it you see his hand, where he...letters he has written, and things that he has done. And one of the things that I thought was very prophetic is that about 3 or 4 days before the 1943 riot, he wrote a letter to Raskin urging...who was then the Executive Secretary of the Civil Rights Federation...suggesting that they have a meeting with all the people who thought as they thought, so that they could do something, because he felt there was a worsening of...the situation was worsening and that things would happen. And, you know, unfortunately, I didn't do this last year where I could have interviewed him, but...could you say something about Reverend Hill?

B: Well, except that...I can say no more than, perhaps, you have said, and that is that he was very, a very vigorous and uncomprising leadership in the total civil rights movement. He was perhaps...he was certainly one of the most dynamic, uncompromising figures in that whole struggle that made himself very definitely felt. He didn't hold back his opinions, he didn't bite his tongue, he went straight into the middle of the fray, and battled for equality of opportunity and for bettering race relations. At every turn he was, of course, suffered some of the disadvantages that people who do this suffer. As you remember, in the backwash of the McCarthy period, he was a little bit touched, but it never made any difference to him. What he thought was right, he stood for, and he gave very...he was, you know, here and there and yonder and wherever the call came. He worked very closely with the Civil Rights Congress, with Raskin and the people who gave leadership there. And, you know, never failed to take leadership where leadership was needed. I remember at the Lucy-Therman YWCA - this was a very famous period for Lucy-Therman YWCA - because he used to have a meeting there almost every day at lunchtime, we'd be meeting to discuss what the new issues were, what the strategies were, what needed to be done. The Sojourner Truth period, the strategies were decided there. We'd go out to the Sojourner Truth grounds and stand upon trucks and make speeches, and he was in the forefront of it all.

And he really did give his, you know, enormous part of his physical strength, an enormous part of his economic resources as well. His church was always open. I think one of the interesting things about him, maybe it was not this particular period, and maybe it was during this period, when the great controversy around Paul Robeson arose, if you remember. It was this period, the McCarthy period. And when this country, so effectively, really silenced Paul Robeson, and made it almost impossible for him to earn a living. But Reverend Hill's church...This was how he never ran out on what he believed. Reverend Hill's church was one of the few places that Paul Robeson could come to Detroit and have a concert and go away with some money to help him live, really, during that period when he was denied places to give concerts in this community, as well as communities all over the country. Reverend Hill's church was one church that was always open to him. And this was characteristic of his position in all of these matters. He cooperated with ministers. There was a movement of the ministers in the South, this is a little bit vague in my mind, it was Claude - I'm trying to think of Claude's name - but anyway, there was a movement of white and Negro ministers in the South, attempting to penetrate the racists through the minister leadership. And one of the ministers, I can't remember his name now, came here and some of the churches assisted him, gave him money. They'd go back and have these training centers for them, where they brought Negro and white ministers together, who would go back among the Southerners to try to leaven the racial feelings there. And he...this man came into such great disfavor...oh, I wish I could remember his last name... he was unfrocked, this minister was unfrocked, because of the unpopularity of the cause of civil rights and race relations and working between races was so unpopular at that time, this man was finally unfrocked. And just about five years ago, oh, I guess it's probably about five or six years ago, a group who worked with Reverend Hill way back when we all worked together during that severe period of struggle, he came back here, this minister, and was re-consecrated in Reverend Hill's church, to the ministry, was re-ordained. He came here with his family, his wife and his children, and at Reverend Hill's church he was re-ordained into the ministry. I haven't heard from him since that time, but he was one of the great moving figures that worked in the South, and came to the north to get support and money and went back and worked, and as I say, he was unfrocked, and for many years was not permitted to engage in the ministry. And was - this is characteristic

of Reverend Hill, too, you know, he brought him back to his church and re-ordained him into the ministry.

M: Another question - Were you, or should I say, how cognizant were you of the possibility...or instances of police brutality during this period?

B: Well, I really don't have any glaring memory of this as being a, you know, a terribly aggravated and sore spot. I think we heard of police brutality, to be sure. I think the riots gave rise to the, you know, to the discussion that there had been undue use of police and police brutality, but I don't remember it as a real aggravating point in the community at the time. I think there were instances of it. The NAACP was always on top of it, but I don't remember a great deal of it. Now maybe I was not...I should have been; I was right out there in the community. But I don't have any memory of, you know, a really acute situation at that particular time. Now, my memory may be faulty. But I certainly hear a thousand times more discussion about it and talk about it than I remember then.

M: You mentioned Communism. How...at this time, how prevalent was this charge being levied against, you know, civil rights people? We hear a lot about it after - during the McCarthy period, but during this particular time, was it very prevalent, this charge?

B: Well, I think at that time you had a great swell, generally speaking, a great swell of good feeling and a feeling of cooperation among the people in the community, and while you heard certain people whispered or pointed out as being communists, and, in the meetings and strategies and the running and operating of meetings people would point out to you that this is the strategy of the communists to run the meeting and to organize the meeting, I think generally in the backwash of the war, there was a lot of feeling of cooperation. There was a...you know, we had quite a good feeling during that time for Russia. Russia had been, you know, it was some organization even here that promoted very good feelings for Russia. And so it was sort of a muted thing, during that period, but when the war was over, there was a considerable rise of this feeling, for instance, as I say, the Metropolitan Detroit Council on Fair Employment Practices broke up. There was a committee, another committee, that, I can't remember the name of it now, Michigan Committee that was organized around the political interests that broke up over the communist dogma and philosophy,

the break between the two. And this is when the Americans for Democratic Action emerged out of the struggle that came during this period over the anti-communists and pro-communists. Several other organizations broke up. I think the Federation, Civil Rights Federation, broke up. The Metropolitan Detroit Council on Fair Employment Practices broke up. This other Michigan committee, I can't remember the name, Dr. Roosevelt was the Executive Director of it. All these organizations broke up on the shoals of the struggle over the idealogy of communism. And then this Americans for Democratic Action made up of those who believed fully in democratic action and liberalism but were anti-communists.

M: Okay. One of the charges that has been raised was that during this period that Negro organizations were more or less led, or co-opted, as the people say, by whites. How true was that in your experience?

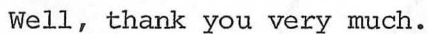
B: Well, as I remember the period, it was a period of a good deal of cooperation and good feeling between racial groups. I don't remember this. NAACP was led by Negroes, and, as I recall, there were fewer white way back in that period on the Board than there were later. I think the white membership increased later, I think, more than I remembered in that early period. NAACP was pretty much a mass, much more than now, it was a mass Negro organization, and I remember when I was, you know, very active in NAACP. I remember very little then. And Urban League Board since 1934, it was always designed to be equal - an equal number of white and Negro on its board, so it's no different today from what it was at that particular time. In the Metropolitan Detroit Council on Fair Employment Practices and the Civil Rights Congress you had Negroes and white working together on a common cause. I don't get the feeling that there was any domination of whites. In the labor movement, naturally, Negroes were reluctant to go into the labor movement. They went more slowly into it, but they began to develop people in leadership positions from the very beginning. Some of the people who are very active now began to rise up into leadership positions even at that time. Oscar Noble, Horace Sheffield, a guy who died, I can't remember his name, who was very active in Sojourner Truth. But, as I saw it, Negro leaders began to emerge, in terms of the fact that, I say, they were reluctant joiners, they were in smaller numbers. I got the feeling of a good deal of cooperation even then, I got to know George Edwards, the Reuthers, the three Reuther brothers, R.J. Thomas. Negroes were not

numerous, but they were rising in positions of leadership at that time. and, as I remember, a great feeling of cooperation, and not, you know, a feeling of separation, division. I didn't get that feeling. I was caught in the middle of much of the civil rights movement, and I would say there were more whites than Negroes, but I would say they walked pretty much side by side.

M: Do you have any...after we've talked...do you have any other ideas or expressions which you would like to interject at this time?

INTERFERENCE. SOMEBODY ELSE TALKING, I THINK. BUT I CAN'T TELL WHAT HE'S SAYING.

Can't think of anything to say? Okay.



Well, thank you very much.