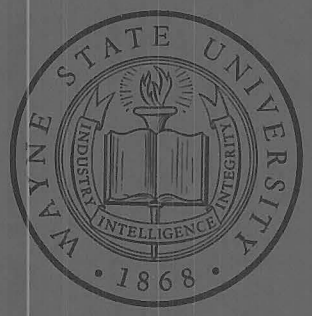
Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs

ORAL INTERVIEW

JOSEPH COLES

JIM KEENEY and ROBERTA McBRIDE,
INTERVIEWERS

JULY 8, 1970



Wayne State University
Detroit, Michigan

INTERVIEW

OF

JOSEPH COLES

by

Jim Keeney
and
Roberta McBride

on
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K - Jim Keeney
C - Joe Coles
M - Roberta McBride

This is July 8, 1970. Jim Keeney and Roberta McBride are interviewing Joseph Coles.

K: Mr. Coles, I understand you were instrumental in helping to organize the Democratic Party in the black community in the early 30's. Was there no Democratic Party before that in the community? Were there no Negroes who voted Democratic?

C: I ran into a couple of fellows back there who were Democrats, even before I tried to organize. But they didn't try to organize anything. They were Democrats and they voted that way.

K: What did Republicans think of this move of people actually organizing in the community?

C: Well, at that time the Republican Party never campaigned in the Negro community after the primaries. They just assumed that the Negro community would vote Republican. So, after we organized the Democrats, then they started campaigning after the primary. Before that, there was no activity in the Negro community by the Republican Party.

K: What issues were there then that were brought up? Of course, this was the early 30's.

C: Yes. Of course, I go back to the twenties.

K: This was when you came here?

C: No, I came here in 1925. I got interested in the party in 1926 to 1929.

K: This was the time when Smith was Mayor?

C: John Smith? He was Mayor in 1925.

K: And he was the first, as I understand it to give jobs to Negroes.

C: That's right, through the Post-Master.

K: Yes, and also city jobs.

C: That's right. He gave Negroes the first assistant corporation counsel.

K: George Loomis got a job.

C: George Loomis was Assistant Prosecuting Attorney. He was a Republican.

M: Rogers was a Democrat?

C: Rogers was a Republican, too, but this was a non-partisan government.

K: Well, can you remember any of the issues that Democrats and Republicans split over in the black community?

C: I think it was in 1926, if I'm not mistaken when Green ran for governor and Groesbeck ran against him in the primary, and John Smith supported Green - Smith was Mayor at that time. Smith brought Green into the Negro community. It was at a big mass meeting - I remember that very distinctly, and the big issue in the Negro community was bringing mixed boxing back to the state of Michigan. You know, that was the period when a Negro and a white man couldn't fight in a bout It came about after the Johnson bout, when he fought Jeffries. Mixed boxing was banned in the state of Michigan. It was against the law to have a film or to have a mixed bout in the state of Michigan. You didn't know that, did you? It was against the law. So John Smith brought in Green to the Negro community, and Green said, "If I am elected governor in this state, I will bring in mixed boxing." And he was elected, and he did bring back mixed boxing. If that hadn't been done, Joe Louis could never have moved up.

K: I never heard that before. We work at a disadvantage, because we have no black newspapers for this period. Nobody's collected them - maybe someone has, and we'll find him.

C: That's a fact! Mixed boxing was banned because they thought it would cause riots - get people excited - and all that.

K: Do you remember these hunger riots and the organization by the C.P. - Communist Party - in the black community?

C: Yes.

K: How much of an effect do you think this had?

C: Well the Communists, the left-wingers made pretty good gains back in those days. A lot of fellows around here, some of the older fellows - I don't recall their names- and some of the fellows I do recall are no longer with

the Communist movement. Of course, it stigmatizes a person now. And they are friends of mine, they're good men. But they were young, back in those days, and economic conditions were bad, and nobody offered them anything. They made quite a dent then. I wouldn't say the majority of Negroes went along, but there was a substantial following.

K: The C.P. was giving them some attention, whereas the others were not.

C: The others were not. There was no movement from the establishment. So the Communists came along, and they had their picnics. There was a place somewhere up in Michigan where they had a lot of picnics. There would be a lot of Negroes up there, and Negroes would go and take a picnic lunch.

M: Did it make sense to you, what the Communist Party was saying it could do for the black man?

C: Yes. I went to some of those things myself. And of course they were, for their time, advanced, they had this theory of self determination in the black community. This was the projection of the issue.

K: Trying to undermine the old Garveyites?

C: Yes, self determination, and to carve out a certain section in the South, a Negro Belt.

M: In general, do you feel that the Negro was just as clever as the Communist - that, just as the Communist was using the Negro, that the Negro saw this as an opportunity, a platform also?

C: Definitely. The Communist national movement had practically nothing about the Negro, back in the Depression.

K: How do you think the Democratic party got on its feet?

C: Well, after Roosevelt got elected - the Negro didn't vote for Roosevelt, too much. Some worked for him, but he just barely carried the Negro.

K: Well, Governor Murphy was quite popular, wasn't he?

C: Oh, yes, he was popular because of the Sweet case.

K: You, of course, came about that time?

C: I, of course, was a reporter - I sat at the press table during that whole trial. Judge Murphy was presiding; Clarence Darrow was there, too. I sat at the press table I covered it for the Chicage Defender and the Afro-American.

M: So that was your first acquaintance with Detroit?

C: No, I was living here. I had come just a short time before. I had been here several times before that. You see, when I was a student at Paine College in Augusta, Georgia, I would come here to work in the plants. So I knew a lot about the city.

K: Where did you work when you came here?

C: I worked in the factories and I think I worked at the old Maxwell plant.

K: Over there in Highland Park?

C: Yes. I never worked at Ford's. I worked at old Packards, and at American Car and Foundry.

K: They hired a lot of blacks, didn't they? I've run into a lot of people who worked there. Where would you live when you came up to work? Did you find housing tight?

C: There weren't too many Negroes. We had a little colony. I lived south of Gratiot, near St. Aubin, on Monroe. This was in the 20's.

K: Did you find it difficult as far as integration was concerned - a lot of racism?

C: Sure, there was a lot of racism back in those days. You couldn't eat in restaurants. I went to a restaurant, one time, out there on Gratiot, and they wouldn't serve me. And I couldn't go to the theater down here on Monroe. Most of the theatres downtown, you couldn't sit in the front rows, you know.

K: Was there a lot of police harrassment then?

C: Of course.

K: It's supposed to have picked up a great deal after the Sweet case, according to the papers. It presented kind of a contrast: the city gave jobs that no other Mayor had, but at the same time --

C: And most of them, he got in government - at the Post Office. You see, the Post office in Detroit was about the third largest in the United States.

K: Do you remember Snow Grigsby in the 30's?

C: I knew Snow before he came here. I met Snow in 1921, when he was still in North Carolina.

M: I read in Walter White's biography that one of the things that threw the Negro into the Democratic Party was the attempt to get confirmation of Judge Parker for the U.S. Supreme Court. I guess that so many Negroes thought that Parker had a poor record on race, that this was used against the Republican Party.

C: I remember that well. Hoover appointed him, and Hoover was elected in 1928, so this must have been a little after that. But I don't think that had anything to do with the Negro changing parties. Walter White might say that but, personally, I don't think that had much to do with it.

K: I wouldn't think it would have too much in this city.

C: I think it goes back to Roosevelt's program for the unemployed.

K: I would like to ask you about various people, giving you their names.

C: Go ahead.

K: Apparently there were no conflicts within the Party among blacks, during the 30's. Things went along pretty smoothly; it wasn't till later on that you got static.

C: The first man who played an important role was Comstock. He made some significant contributions.

K: Yes. Even the Tribune, which didn't like to say a kind word for the Democrats, mentioned that appointments of Negroes had been greater than they had ever been before.

C: Yes. You see, appointments of Negroes to offices had been unheard of - they named Diggs to be parole officer - Charlie Diggs' father. That was a pretty big appointment for those days. And a Negro was named assistant Attorney General - that was unheard of, till then.

And under Comstock we had a liquor control, that is, we had a store in the Negro community manned by Negroes - an old fat Negro, and that was on Hastings Street. These were pretty big things.

K: And Governor Murphy was able to continue this practice?

C: Yes, when he got in, we made progress under him, especially Secretary of State. I think Murphy named Leon Case. And his chief deputy was Barney Youngblood. And Barney was a liberal. He put lots of Negroes in. He opened a branch office of the Secretary of State with a Negro manager in the Negro community. This was the first time that happened. And a Negro was named to some labor post - Harold Bledsoe. And there was old man Charles Diggs in the state Senate. The State Senate was divided. Charles Diggs was the swing vote, so that the Democrats had a one-vote majority.

K: Let's see, Diggs got through a civil rights bill, didn't he? Do you want to tell me a little about Cunningham?

C: Cunningham? He was sort of a partner of mine.

K: That's right. They talked about the Coles-Cunningham team. Was he a lawyer?

C: No. We opposed Diggs, Bledsoe, Craigin. We were a faction in the Democratic Party.

K: Had he always been a Democrat?

C: Yes. His first acvity was in housing.

K: And he went in about the same time as you?

C: No, I was in first although I was younger. I brought him in.

K: I see. Was he born in Detroit?

C: No, he was born in Kansas.

K: And then Simmons who ran for Council?

C: Yes, he was with us. We put him in the race.

K: Yes, he ran once in 1943, and you tried to get him to run in 1945?

C: He ran against Diggs, didn't he, for the Senate?

K: He may have. He was a lawyer?

C: He was a lawyer, in the law firm of Harold E. Bledsoe for a while.

K: Arthur Caruso, remember him?

C: Yes. Arthur Caruso came in from New York. He came in 1928. He was a street-speaker. He had his ladder - he would mount it and start speaking.

K: Do you remember Colonel Takahashi at all?

C: Yes, he was here during the War.

K: Yes, he came here during the 30's - was in jail most of the time after that. He was supposed to be kind of a spell-binder.

K: And then, one other fellow, and we'll get on - Reverend William Lysles. Lysles organized the National Association of American Workers.

C: He had a paper organization - he never had anything, really.

K: Was he active after the war?

C: Oh, Lysles never counted for much. He was around.

K: Probably when you came into quite a bit of prominence was during the Jeffries administration. Now you had already come to odds with Diggs, aparently in 1942.

C: Earlier than that. You see, in 1936 - that year Murphy and Prentiss Brown ran and they both won. What happened was - Cunningham and I supported Brown. We were more or less Brown's campaign manager in the Negro community. We had been at Grand Rapids in the primary where we had endorsed George Sadowski. Because he was our friend, and we were with him. And the other man won, so we didn't have too much to do. Diggs, and Bledsoe and Craigin were the big Negroes then and we weren't so hot. But we had Brown. Here's what happened. Murphy was a one-termer. And when I say Senate I'm saying a six-year term. But we had Brown. So when Murphy got defeated, all these fellows tried to go for Brown. But it was too late. We had Brown. These others tried to cut in but they couldn't. We handled all his affairs, and we were recognized as the top Negroes in

the state of Michigan. All the plums from Washington we got. We saw a Negro named United States Marshal, and we got Negroes Washington jobs, and jobs in the post office. And they were shut out - Diggs, Bledsoe, Craigin - they couldn't get back in. So we had that power four more years. Then we went to the Attorney General's office and we recommended Bledsoe for a judgeship. But Murphy didn't give it to him - he gave it to a Negro in Chicago. And Prentiss Brown was plugging for us. Brown didn't like Murphy too much.

K: What finally pushed the thing to a breaking point in 1940?

C: What do you mean?

K: In the Michigan Chronicle it said that the Cunningham-Cole faction finally ousted the Democratic-

C: Ousted?

K: Ousted.

C: Well, of course, we had the most powerful democratic organization on the scene in Detroit. And we had more folks at our meetings - everyone would come to our meetings. We had Van Wagoner at our meeting in 1940. Pat Van Wagoner. And what Pat would do, he split things and gave the other faction some too.

K: You were president of the Frederick Douglass Non-Partisan Civic League?

C: Yes, but it didn't make much of a dent.

K: Now, was that set up for city politics more than state politics? Non-partisan - did that have to do with the mayor?

C: Yes. That was more for Jeffries.

K: William Sherrill - He was a Democrat - and he attacked Jeffries in 1941, because Jeffries hadn't made any big Negro appointments. What was your impression of Jeffries?

C: I think Jeffries was one of the finest mayors this town has ever seen. He wasn't a racist or a bigot. His first office was on the city council. And he won by just a small vote. Each councilman, in those days could appoint three supervisors. And Jefferies was the first to make Negroes supervisors.

K: Well, Jeffries in 1939 and in 1941 has the Negro vote - in both elections. Now, up to 1941 it's true that William Sherrill and some other downtown politicians didn't feel that he gave Negroes the appointments they deserved. Now there's one question I would like you at least to comment on before we get into the riot period, and that has to do with housing which is, of course, quite important. Now, Jeffries never liked public housing very much - he made this quite clear in his attitude toward federal officials who came in. He would be the only Councilman, for instance, who would vote against giving any money to Strauss, who was one of the people coming in to dedicate the Brewster Project. Now, the Housing Commission is a sore point in -

C: This is what turned the Negro people against him. I'll tell you how that came about - the inside story. I don't think the Negroes wanted to integrate public housing. There was a lot of sentiment against it. We've always had integrated housing, and I'm for it. But we have to start at our easiest point, not the most difficult one. They wanted Jeffries to put Negroes out at Herman Gardens. Jeffries said he wasn't going to put Negroes there, where no Negroes lived. "We're going to have them in mixed neighborhoods, where Negroes are already living, places which are already integrated. Don't try to spread over the whole city - let's start at our easiest spot."

K: When was this?

C: I don't know. This was when the housing difficulties began. I'm at the point where the housing thing broke. "Herman Gardens? No, I won't do it - I'll put it in Jeffries. And then if it is successful there, we can integrate all over the city." This is what he told us. They refused that compromise. When he still refused, they went out to defeat Jeffries. This was in 1943, I believe. His opponent was Frank Fitzgerald. And the Negro precincts all went for him. That is in the primaries. Then in the general election it was close. Now, where was I? I left about this time and went to Washington. I came back for the next election.

K: You were with the OPA?

C: Yes, I went to Washington. Prentiss Brown took me down there; he became O.P.A. administrator and took

me there. I came back here and I had lunch with Jeffries. "Now you lost the Negro vote, " I said. "That was your bloc, and you lost it. Now, you're going to have to go out and win it back, somehow." He listened to me and when I said, "Well, we've got to start making moves. We can't do it all at one time. You've got to start moving around." He says, "All Right." And he did - and he did all right. Next time he ran, he brought a substantial number of Negroes back to him - not a majority - I'm not saying that. But he had a good Negro vote. When several Negroes were trying to organize a company to deliver beer they had trouble with the Teamsters who wouldn't let them operate. Now Jeffries stepped in there and

K: Jimmy Hoffa - wasn't it, who wouldn't have any Negroes?

C: Yes, Jimmy Hoffa - Jeffries arrested him once, and put him in jail. Did you know that? Yes, he stepped in and got these fellows their licenses, and told them not to bother these fellows. If it hadn't been for Jeffries, they would never have been able to get the drivers to drive the trucks. So, that was one thing Jeffries did. Those fellows, they were strong for Jeffries. And then he put a Negro woman on the City Plan Commission. And they were pressing Civil Service to give us more jobs. And he said to me, "You're always pressing me on Civil Service, but where you need to be, where you would have your hands on the reins - you can get in on housing, and everything from there." So that's why he put that woman in there. I recommended her appointment. He was the one who told us, "I'll take care of Civil Service." He started on the DSR, the bus-drivers. He went to the DSR and straightened them out. All the Negro bus-drivers on the DSR are due to Jeffries. I'm not saying he got the first Negro bus-driver in - that was under Reed, and there were some Negroes under the old DUR. And when the DSR took over, they brought these Negroes in the DSR, but just a handful. But Jeffries really got Negroes in the DSR, and people don't know that.

K: Well, now let's get to Reverend White. Now, you never saw eye to eye with Reverend White.

C: I would cuss him out every time I saw him.

K: He was one of the most important appointments Jeffries made.

C: Yes, but see he fought with Jeffries - that's where he and I fell out. I brought him into politics. He

came up from Cleveland. I brought him into politics in the Jeffries administration. Nice looking young man - good talker, fluent, good education. And we needed him politically.

K: He was very popular.

C: We helped to make him popular.

K: He played a fairly important role -

C: He played a very important role - after we made him. But we had to project him first. And we did that projection, politically, in the Jeffries administration. We made speeches for him, and as I said, he was a good talker. And come to find out, he was double-crossing me. He was going back to Jeffries, letting on I said things. I would sit down with him, and agree to certain things. And I found out he was working against me, even when seeming to agree with me. That's the way he operated.

K: You wrote two or three articles where you told him off pretty well - where you dragged him over the coals. The reason I bring it up was that I was interested in knowing why you chose that particular time. This was a political act, I would assume. This was in 1942. And what I found interesting was that the radicals - everyone from Reverend Hill, William Sherrill,

C: LeBron Simmons

K: Simmons had just worked White over at a meeting that summer. Remember, this follows Sojourner Truth episode, and they went after him on this. They you come along, representing a different faction, and work on him also. One has the feeling White was really getting it from both sides, heavily. And I was wondering why it was at that point; I would assume you knew a lot of people who were involved at this riot. Why did you feel that you had to lower the boom on him?

C: Well, I'll tell you why that was - Sojourner Truth and White. During the riot White had flown to Washington. Representative Tenerowicz put him up

to it. He would go to Tenerowicz and tell him what to do. And then Tenerowicz would say,"I did it because Rev. White told me to." White was on the Housing Commission then, too. He went to Washington, and Tenerowicz said, "I'm in trouble with the Negro community, and I'm taking your advice." And that got out. And Negroes were really mad.

M: Was that true?

C: Sure, it was true. Tenerowicz wrote that into the Congressional Record in black and white. White had a way of saying one thing to white leadership and another thing quite the opposite in the black community. He would go down town and talk to the Mayor, and give him quite a different story. You've got people who do that now, talk out in the Negro community - oh, you'll burn the town down, then to the whites - He did tell Tenerowicz - I forgotten just what he told him, but Tenerowicz said, publicly, "I did it because Rev. White told me to."

K: Well, then he broke with Tenerowicz. He told him blacks would fight fire with fire.

C: Well, he was guilty of what Tenerowicz said he had said.

K: There is another thing I would like to ask about. One of the things that White tells, in relation to Soujourner Truth, is that the black people at Conant Gardens didn't want the project.

C: That's right. They didn't want it either.

K: The people at Eight Mile did. Now, in 1940 a number of blacks got involved. Do you remember Crispus, the proposed town? What they were talking about was Royal Oak Township. They were going to set up an organized town called Crispus, Michigan.

C: No. I was then on the Commission on Community Relations. I was to look into Eight Mile Road

K: You know Ray Hatcher, then?

C: Yes. They were talking about organizing - I forget what name they used - and they asked me to investigate the possibility of organizing a government. I talked with Al Pelham about it, and he told me that they couldn't do it, because they didn't have the tax base.

And I wrote a report on that, recommending they shouldn't do it - because they had nothing - the biggest thing they had there was the housing project, and that was tax exempt. You couldn't tax that. They had no grease joints or barbecue places even. How are you going to get money for education? How are you going to get money for police, for sewers? They had no important businesses - they had no tax base. I recommended they -

K: They started the push on this in 1940. Do you remember Alfred Cassey? Cassey was for it. He used to write a column in the Tribune. He wrote some good stuff. He saw a lot of things. Of course, he was a Republican.

C: Of course, what I'm talking about, didn't come until 1946.

K: Yes, Oakfield Gardens.

C: Yes. I joined the Commission for Community Relations in 1945, and I was sent up there a little later to study this area.

K: What do you think were the effects of the Riot? The 1943 Riot?

C: That was more of a race riot that the last one which wasn't really a race riot, when you come right down to it. In 1943 Negroes were actually fighting - in 1967 there wasn't any racial confrontation at all, so you couldn't classify them as the same thing. No white person got killed by any Negro in 1967, and white people did get killed in 1943, and Negroes got killed - that was a racial riot.

K: I think that's a very valid point to make.

C: Very few of today's troubles are race riots. If Jeffries were mayor I wouldn't call it that. But of course that in itself lends -
You know, I was with Jeffries all during the 1943 riot, and with Police Commissioner Witherspoon?

K: Well, wasn't there more dislike for Witherspoon that for Jeffries?

C: Let me tell you about Witherspoon. I've known John Witherspoon for a long time, and I don't say he is without fault. But his part in the riot wasn't too bad. It was Witherspoon who kept the Negroes' houses from being burned. People don't know that. There was a white mob that marched down from Woodward Ave-

nue on the west side. They were coming down Vernor Highway. They came up to Brush. They had torches and were going to burn the Negro neighborhood. And the police were there, even Witherspoon himself, to stop those whites, and to save the Negro houses. I know that for a fact. Now I don't know about some of the other things he's done. Of course there was something about Negroes coming in from Chicago - I think Witherspoon told me about hearing that some were coming and asking me what I thought about it. That was a rumor in the Police Department.

K: That Negroes were coming in from Chicago?

C. Yes, to participate in the riot, but -

D: I only know of one who came. One guy who came over from Chicago did a report on the riot. That's in the Urban League papers.

C: I do remember this. There were all those white police - I'm sure some of them worked their spleen off abusing Negroes.

K: Well, that's what that Shogan book said -

C: I'm sure of that, but I wouldn't put that on Witherspoon; I wouldn't put that on the Mayor.

K: Well, certainly the next police commissioner was a lot better than Witherspoon - John Ballinger. He went out of his way to try to -

C: He was put in for that reason. You know, Jeffries had quite a deal there when he replaced Witherspoon. Witherspoon was a nephew of John Lodge. And John Lodge was the mentor of Jeffries. He was an old sage. So, for Jeffries to fire Witherspoon took some big doings. But he did it.

K: What I had in mind, more than anything else, is the effect on political appointments, general attitudes. I have the feeling that with the riots there was a set-back - quite a set-back. After 1943, for instance, these appointments, which you had talked about the Councilmen making to the County Board of Supervisors, disappeared. I think you will find, that in the UAW, they started dropping Negro organizers. You had these two campaigns that were filled with a lot of venom; and on top of this you had the press that inflamed race.

C: And these federations - of homeowners - 155 of them - and out of this came Cobo.

K: In 1941 you had the organization of Ford - and in a way, the end of the old school. No longer did Father Daniels or Rev. Bradby hold the position they once had. Now you developed a new group of men - some in the Democratic party - like Ray Hatcher and Glouster Current. The articles in the papers began mentioning the Urban League and the NAACP. There was a move toward direct confrontation, as with Sojourner Truth, and then came the Riot. But after the Riot there were no more direct confrontations on housing. They had a chance to do that and decided not to, in the Southwest Detroit housing. They wanted to put up housing down there, and the Mayor thought that would be good, and Rogell and those other guys were fighting against it.

C: I would say that up to the Riot there was a committment to housing, and after that we had this organization of improvement associations - they was a kind of retreat. You had to think of these white councilmen. You're elected by that grouping. That's the way I feel.

K: Even liberals like Edwards - All right. There was the same thing in 1937.

C: That's the year Jeffries became president of the Council

K: Jeffries was a liberal.

C: He appointed me, at that time as a member of the City Election Commission. Each member of the Council could make an appointment. He put me in; there was a Jewish fellow. So when Jeffries ran again, I was his chief campaign manager in the Negro community.

K: What I was thinking was that in 1937 when Jeffries got an overwhelming vote, that was the year, also, when the establishment really put the screws on labor - when labor tried to run candidates - remember Maurice Sugar?

C: Yes, and that was when Walter Reuther ran for the City Council. And did you know that Jeff supported him? and Charles Edgecomb?

K: Do you think that Edgecomb was a racist?

C: In some respects. Charlie and I were personal friends. We worked with each other many years. But I remember one time he called someone "nigger" right out in a meeting. It was at a Community Relations Commission meeting, and I was sitting there when he said it. He was embarrased, but he had said it. You know, he was the one who put me on that job. He was Jeff's man on the Commission. Jeff told him, "I want you to put Joe on the staff." Now all the Negroes in town were against me at that time. And all the Negro papers opposed me. And Dr. McClendon resigned from a committee when I was appointed. John Ballinger was the liberal white police commissioner when I went in. He was on the Commission too, at that ime. At that time it was made up of certain heads of city departments. So John Ballinger hesitated - he didn't want me to come in there. Jeff said to him, "John, you like your job? (of police commissioner)" "Oh, yes, very much," says John. "Well, if you care a lot for it, you go in there today, and vote for Joe Coles for the staff." I didn't hear that, but John Ballinger told me later. So Edgecomb was the man on the Commission who ran this thing down.

K: Well, Edgecomb was the man who acted to keep Negroes out of Willow Village.

C: Jeffries said to me,"I've never been the mayor of this town before. I've been sitting up here. But now, I'm going to be mayor of this town. I haven't been my own man before." Now he told me what he was going to do.

K: The fact that Hudson played a big role, according to Josephine Gomon, the reason that the Housing Commission originally set up segregated housing, which they did before Brewster, was to save Brewster for blacks. Hudson, and the downtown stored wanted that whole area to become, well, what a lot of it became -

C: Well, they ran the town - the Webbers wanted to foster trade. That's what you call invisible government. I want to come up to Cobo for just a minute. Edwards was just back from the Army; and then he tried to run for mayor. I was in Chicago attending an A.D.A. convention. And George Edwards and I came down on the elevator at the convention hotel. George says, "You know, I'm running for mayor. What do you think of my candidacy?" I said, "George, I don't think very much of it. First, you've got too many points. You're going to do too many things. Folks can't take in all of this. You need to pick out two or three things, and dramatize those." I told him that, and I told him his chances weren't too good. He wasn't the best man to run for mayor. The Improvement Associations were

for Cobo. I knew him.

K: I gather he was one of the worst?

C: Yes, he was. That was the dark ages of Detroit.

K: Would you say - I have the feeling that from 1943 on things began to get worse - and you went into a decade, really, of retrogression.

C: For all that, we had only a few Negro advances. Cobo's friends whom he appointed -

K: Pouring oil on troubled waters?

C: Yes.

K: In relationship to this business after World War II, did people feel - some of the fangs of the NAACP were pulled by the appointment of Reuther on the Board? And that the NAACP became too closely tied to the UAW? The UAW was the liberal thing in town, and they feel that Gloster Currant was important in developing this.

C: I'll tell you what happened, as I see it, as regards the role of the UAW. They were very helpful, but they were also harmful. They were helpful in the sense that they helped us win elections in the Democratic party. They were a powerful political ally of the Negro. But they did harm - they destroyed Negro leadership. There was no political leadership when they took over. Negroes didn't lead in the Democratic party, like Bledsoe, and these others who get credit now. They did you a favor, but they controlled things. The only Negroes who could come up and get political leadership were Negroes they picked. Al Barbour and Milly Jeffries - they were the ones who picked. They picked Patrick for Councilman. Negroes didn't pick him, they did. And when he got in, Patrick couldn't do a thing without Al Barbour He couldn't sneeze unless Barbour told him to. This was the harmful part. Their choices didn't flow from the Negro people. We had a big fight on that, you know. That came on Miriani. And we broke that. And we broke it in the Democratic Party, when the party met in Grand Rapids. The labor people, Gus Scholle, Milly Jeffries, Neil Staebler, the national Committeeman, who of course wasn't labor - they were all behind Wortman for Wayne State Board of Governors. Millie Jeffries, Gus Scholle, Al Barbour - that's power. They were all behind Wortman. I led that fight against them. Neil Staebler was there, and I wouldn't be surprised if Governor Williams was there - I don't know. I had good relations with Roy Reuther - Roy and I were old

friends from way back - from the old Socialist Party - and Emil Mazey too. So I went to Roy. "Roy," I said, "we Negroes are sick and tired of the way things are going. You have been helpful, very helpful to us. We appreciate all the good things you have done. But we don't like to be dictated to - Milly Jeffrey, and Al Barbour just taking hold, and we not having anything to say-we're tired of that." Roy says, "What's wrong? I agree with you Joe." "They want Charles Wortman for Wayne State Board of Governors." I was behind D.T. Burton. They had gone out and talked with D.T. and made him withdraw. I went out and got to D.T., and I said, "Get back in the race. We can win." They didn't know I was close to Roy Reuther. When they caucused in Grand Rapids, I had Horace Sheffield, and Bill Oliver on my side. When they caucused at the UAW convention, Roy Reuther said "Just a minute. Don't rush this. Let's find out what the Negroes want." Brother Hopkins met right with us - God bless him. He joined Roy. "That's right! Let's let the Negroes run this convention." I was standing right there.

K: What year was this? 1960? Had TULC already been organized?

C: When TULC showed their power? That wasn't till Cavanagh was elected. I -

M: Well, I guess it was the year Burton came on the Board of Governors, 1959.

C: Yes, that was the important time, when we broke the strength of Milly Jeffries - Milly Jeffries, Gus Scholle, and Al Barbour. Do you know she cried at that convention because Charles Wortman was defeated? We defeated him. I directed the folks. I was there the last night - up all night in district meetings, and the like.

M: What was Alex Fuller's role?

C: He was against me. That's right, he was over there. He was just a stooge for Barbour. Yes, we broke the back of the labor movement domination in the Negro community. It was our emancipation.

K: Why would you say the UAW has never had political power in the city? They have never been able to get their boy elected.

C: You see what they did was make a big mistake.

They had a piece of the power. Then they got out of power completely, with Van Antwerp and Cobo. Van Antwerp was really elected by the Old Irish. They lost power - they supported Edwards.

K: Well, they have never been able to have their man.

C: Well, you see, they ran a man back there - when they ran O'Brien. They ran a man on a slate. They ran a whole slate and got defeated.

K: Then they backed Jeffries in 1939 and 1941, Fitzgerald in 1943 and 1945, Frankensteen.

C: But they did come out for Jeffries.

K: Oh, yes.

C: And Jeffries recognized them. Then when Cobo came in - they came into the dark ages. Cobo was a Democrat, but an anti-Williams Democrat. Cobo was awful! But I got along all right with Cobo. Cobo liked me. But I didn't have permanent civil service status and I was careful not to get too close to him. He was the kind of man who would tell you, "Why don't you go up there and sell my house?" If you disagreed with him he would get angry, "You don't agree with me on anything, do you?" Oh, he was terrible to me, so I stayed away from him. I got along with him personally. On a personal basis, it was all right. Then, when Miriani came in, labor became pretty important. It was a natural alliance for the labor movement. Al Barbour was powerful. And after Miriani's mayoral defeat he cried.

M: Labor was once more trying to dictate to the Negro community.

C: That's right. And this time the Negro community just wouldn't take it. They went all out for Cavanagh.

M: You would think they had learned their lesson. But they tried to stop Crockett, too, didn't they?

C: The labor movement doesn't bother Negroes too much now - you don't see many of them around. Milly Jeffries comes out - if she is asked. But she doesn't come dictating like she used to.

K: No, they try to do it within the ranks.

C: No, with Tom Turner now - they support what we want, now.

K: Tom Turner's position is one I wouldn't want for beans. He came out and talked to the Jewish Labor Committee about various things. This had more to do with education, community control of schools, and the like. He was going to take one position, but he suddenly reversed himself.

C: Well, he's just been elected. He's got the building trades, and all that.

K: There are some names I would like to bring up and ask you about. You knew George Isabell?

C: Very well.

K: He, of course, was the most prominent black in housing. He was suposed to be in charge of the Brewster Project, wasn't he? He lost out because he failed the civil service exam.

C: He was the first Negro manager of a housing project in Detroit, and he was given that position by Reading But he failed the exam.

K: Yes, there's a case where the name of Diggs didn't help out. There was something going on there which didn't come out.

C: Well, I know what it was.

K: Another thing - you remember Aaron Toodles? He, of course, was a Republican too.

C: He was one of the best platform men they had around, he and Snow Grigsby.

K: He was very much against public housing apparently. You remember, back during the war, it was proposed by the City Plan and the Housing Commission that they tear down sections up around Wayne - a large amount of Negro housing there in order to put in the Medical Center. Apparently Toodles owned an awful lot of property through there, and there were a lot of shenanigans - of course, this is another example where you can take an issue and split the community - I don't know if you remember that.

C: Oh, yes, everything that happened for a number of years I remember - I was in on everything; I wasn't a party to it,but I knew about it. I had to.

K: In going back over this period from the 1920's on - one of the worst things black people have had to fight was a conspiracy of silence, where any murders which occurred, any problems in the community, never got any notice -

C: Newspapers wouldn't cover it.

K: The News blew up this picture of Dr. Sweet as though he were in league with the Devil. Well, one had the feeling that during the war the local Fair Employment Practices Committee was able to get something in the papers, for the first time, of prejudicial hiring practices, one has the feeling that even though there was the Riot, and even though appointments became fewer, and even though - there was more of a chance to understand at least for those who wanted to try to understand, this problem. Do you feel this was true? What I'm driving at, eventually - although you played more of a conservative role in the Democratic Party - is that some of the radicals like Hill and White -

C: Well, White wasn't any liberal. You know, I was the organizer of the Ford Drive. The Union really started out when I was an organizer. I picked the first girl in a union office out on Michigan Avenue. She was the first one when Michael Widman came here from the United Mineworkers to head the drive. Sure, I was right in there. I knew Walter Reuther and Mazey and the others. You know, Walter married a school teacher.

K: Then you knew Judah Drob?

C: Yes, very well.

K: One has the feeling with Jeffries that he wanted to deal politically, as in the old school. I've gone through all the Mayor's papers. He would comment in letters to Edwards (You remember, Edwards was in the Army) - there are four or five letters there to Edwards which are very interesting. You get an idea how Jeffries thinks, at least how he thinks in relationship to Edwards. It seems that his chief criticism of blacks was that they made too much noise about things; and if they didn't make noise, he would be able to do more for them.

C: That was his thinking! That's how he put this proposition to me - that he would integrate this housing project - but it won't be Herman Gardens where no Negroes are living within ten miles - that's not

the one for the first integrated project. "I can't do that...", he said.

K: Blacks were beginning to demand social power at this point.

C: They had no power.

K: Of course, you're the man who made the statement, with which I don't disagree, but which does represent just one side of the case. You attacked a group within the Democratic Party for "holding an empty gun to the heads of whites."

C: I said that several years before.

K: I will say that there was a little powder around. They had been able to do certain things. And I'm wondering if they backed down in the way that Jeffries would want - in other words you could say your people out here on the left are making a lot of noise - left and right is merely a mode of speaking for some people being more vocal - then you could say that at least he's going to see you, whereas when things were absolutely quiet, say, in the twenties, what is a man going to do - he can't do anything. As Reading and Couzens said, "I don't have to listen to you."

C: When Lodge ran for Mayor, he never made a speech.

K: He never made a speech - and bragged about it.

C: You see, in those days we didn't have many controls, except the downtown business group. We didn't have a labor movement back then to amount to anything; they selected a governor to suit themselves.

K: And strong-man mayor - as a result of the 1918 charter -

C: And a weak council. You see, they set that up purposely. And then the labor movement came along. And the first time they flexed their muscles they went down to defeat. And then when they backed Edwards they went down to defeat again. So each man had to appreciate political reality. And there was a period of, I would say about twelve years when the improvement associations were so organized that you couldn't do a thing even if the Council supported you.

K: Well, some of the strongest men were defeated - Carl Smith. It is interesting that some of the most rabid of those men were defeated. I don't know

what you would conclude from that.

C: Let me tell you something: even in that situation always some so-called liberals - labor people - would make it on the Council - they would elect one or two. They didn't want to shut out that voice completely. Edwards always got elected.

K: Of course Hill criticized Edwards, the fact that he would say one thing in the black community, another in the white; when he was with Hill in the black community, it sounded quite different from when they were together in the white.

C: I don't know. George Edwards, in my opinion, is a good liberal. In politics, in that day, you just couldn't survive if you had done what Hill wanted. You just couldn't live. Jeff carried Edwards. If it hadn't been for Jeffries, Edwards wouldn't have made it. I imagine he carried him on the theory he had to have some voice.

K: Oh, he was a good president.

C: This is why Jeff carried him - you can't have all the voices be conservative.

K: Another thing was that he was a labor man who wasn't a radical. If you read his letters they are all very rational.

C: Jeffries liked Edwards.

K: Do you remember in 1945, when Jeffries broke with the Democratic party? It was in Chicageo, and he told them that the problem in Detroit was housing, and the problems of Detroit housing was the New Deal?

C: You know, he ran as a Republican for governor? Do you know that?

K: Yes, but he had always been considered democratic - something of a liberal.

C: No -! His father was one. His father told me how much trouble he had with Jeff. He and his father fought all the time on economic matters. They were close as a father and son could be, but on political issues he was miles away from his son.

K: Was there a feeling in the black community that Jeffries was tied very closely to the housing interests?

C: I'm sure he was. I wouldn't deny that. This is one of the things that you had to do to survive as mayor of this town. Look back, Reading was a real estate speculator. Now you couldn't say that about Jeff. He was honest.

K: Was Smith an honest man?

C: I doubt it. He was tied up with the gambling interests, especially Negro gamblers. But they weren't paying any money to Jeff. The Negro gamblers were all against Jeff. Jeff would crack down on them and they would come to Jeff and say, "We can't do this, and this and this." He would say,"I'm not against gambling, I'm against commercial gambling." He said, "If you want to go to your clubs and play cards, and shoot crap, and the like, and there's no bag involved, I'll guarantee my policemen won't be there." There's no law against that - the law is against commercial gambling. You can go in your house and change money all you want, and no policeman will bother you. But when you put that bag down - Why look at DAC - There's gambling there all the time. And Negroes work there and see it. They know white people get by with it. So Negroes say, "White people gambling over there - how come police don't bother them?'

K: Negroes felt that the crackdown on gambling in the Negro community was trying to cut Negroes out of the pot. Do you remember the fellow - I can't think of his name - who was the biggest one in the numbers game? He was killed in about 1934 or 35. Willie Mosely? Do you remember him?

C: Oh, yes, very well. I knew all those gamblers.

K: He owned the Tribune, apparently.

C: Mosely? Sure, he did. I knew every one of those gamblers - every one.

M: He was the one who distributed baskets at Christmas?

K: Yes.

C: I knew him.

K: His brother took over some of the interests - I don't know how thoroughly.

C: Then the Italians moved in but Negroes have control in Detroit now. They have it now. The Police Department - you always hear about the Police Department being brutal - but Negro gamblers increased

around here more than they have anywhere in the United States. But Negroes had more power here than they did anywhere in the United States - right here in Detroit.

K: You lost some friends by a statement you made one time during the war. You said these families which had moved north of the Boulevard were running houses of prostitution up there. Remember?

C: I don't remember saying that. But some of them did run some houses. If I said it, it was true. I knew what was going on, you can bet that. I know pretty much what's going on now, too. But then I really knew.

K: Where did you live during this war period?

C: I lived on Joseph Campeau and Vernor Highway.

K: Did you ever live on the West side?

C: No.

K: Do you know why pressure was put on Snow Grigsby and Turner Ross - why the pressure was put on them to drop their extra-curricular activities?

C: I put the pressure on Snow.

K: You had Wilson Newman write this letter?

C: I'm the man who had the pressure put on.

K; Why?

C: First, Snow was a federal government employee and prohibited from political activities and Snow was a Republican, you know. He was playing Republican politics all his life. And he would come under the guise of education and always have the models of good Republicans at meetings. And then he would get money out of that, you see. And he was against Democrats. I'm the man who pressured him.

K: Was Turner Ross the same? They both worked at the Post Office at the same time.

C: I don't remember ever putting pressure on Turner Ross. I don't remember Turner doing anything like that.

K: Austin Chavis wrote a letter. He wrote one of the letters. Wilson Newman wrote a letter, also.

C: Wilson is my buddy.

K: But Austin wrote and said that Turner Ross was using his office for - political gain.

C: I don't know about that, but I do know Snow Grigsby. He was a talker clear back. He was like some black militants they have now. He was having those big meetings - rabble-rousing. And he would take up those big collections. And no one knew what became of the money. He would always have a big meeting - a mass meeting - right before elections. So we said, "We can't have this going on. If he can do it, other people can do it." So we clipped his wings. I'm the man who did it.

K: Well, he did a lot of good work. He got Negroes in the Fire Department.

C: Everybody does some good. He did a few things that were good, yes. But I don't think that was his intention.

M: Was the March on Washington Movement in 1941 and afterward very strong here?

C: I remember when Randolph came here and made some impact. But that March would have failed. He couldn't have got enough members there to get any place. Randolph was bluffing, but it worked on Roosevelt. Roosevelt, I understand, called La Guardia in New York. And La Guardia told him, "If he says he's going to march, then he's going to march. If he told you that, that's what he's going to do."

K: That reminds me. One of the criticisms of Jeffries was that he wasn't La Guardia.. and that La Guardia went out of his way to attract as much federal money as possible. If Jeffries had attracted more money into Detroit, they wouldn't have had the housing problems that they did.

C: Well, I would say that Jeffries was the most frugal mayor Detroit ever had. Everything that Cobo did was with Jeffries' money. Jeffries saved the money. He was a real economical mayor. He was an honest man - he didn't steal. La Guardia - we've got a different kind of town here. First thing, New York City has a lot of Jews. It has a million and a half Jews, a big Negro population, a big foreign population. It was a different climate. And a lot of them don't live in New York. They live in Connecticut and New Jersey, and all around. La Guardia had a base that Jeff didn't have here. You can do more liber-

ating in New York than you can in Detroit--years ago, I would say, but not now. I would say that a man has to be a liberal in Detroit now, but we are talking about twenty, thirty years ago. It's amazing to find things here were as good as they were. I would say this, that if Jeff had a good political base, he could have done much more.

K: How much of a Jimmy Walker was he - in the flashy sense?

C: He wasn't a Jimmy Walker. He gambled a lot. But he wasn't a woman chaser. He drank a lot. But Jeffries was a good man.

K: By 1947 he had become "too much of a wise guy" - this was the News speaking.

C: Yeah, he was a "wise guy," he was a smart alec type. He was very sharp. He treated Negroes better than he did white people.

K: You should have seen the stuff he sent back to the students at the University of Michigan. After the riot a lot of people wrote to him.

C: He treated Negroes better than he did whites, and Negroes at that time weren't capable of being treated that way. They wanted some special consideration, personal graces - like bowing. They love bowing. And Jeff would never go for that. He used to call me a black son of a bitch. He would say, "What's the difference between a black son of a bitch and the other kind?" He would say that to them, even to black man and they would get mad. You could go to Jeff about anything. Even as close a friend as I was a friend of mine went down there to get something he said, "Why the Hell do you cuss all the time? Why should I do anything for Joe Coles? What has he done?" And he and I were friends. That was his style then. That was the way he was. You were for me or for him. Say you were asking him to do something for somebody. He would cut you off, "What have you done? And who is he?" And if you ran, or weakened he blasted you. He would say about someone, "He doesn't have much on the ball. He wouldn't stand up." This way, he was against everything anyone brought to him.

K: Doesn't this illustrate what the establishment had in mind when they set up the government? Just as they set up a government in Pittsburg, a city government to keep things quiet, spend very little money, the least government is the best government?

C: Of course! They designed this government for the well-to-do - for the business interests.

K: If you're the mayor, you have to be their pawn. Was there a

feeling in the Negro community that Negro organizers for the UAW in the late 30's and early 40's were being used by the UAW in order to organize Ford to appeal to sentiment in the community? And then, later on, they were being used for window dressing more than anything else?

C: I would say that Negroes could not possibly have made the gains they did without the union. And any human organization has its shortcomings. The union has some shortcommings and faults. But in the main they were a godsend to the Negro people, not only on the economic front, in wages and hours, and so forth; and they gave to the NAACP and they supported certain things -

K: How about the Urban League? At the beginning you mentioned a few things about John Dancy?

C: I wonder, what time is it?

M: I think we have about ten or so minutes more on the tape.

C: All right. I thought a lot of John. When I first got into politics I opposed John and John knew about it. But we got to be very good friends.

C: Well, John was very class conscious, very fraternity conscious. I felt that he was very narrow. Of course, he was establishing himself. After that, and after I got to know him, I changed my opinion. I thought John was doing all he could do. And when I got up where I had contacts and influence, I tried to do a lot of things to improve things. For instance I worked on the Detroit News for years and years to get a Negro reporter. I worked for ten years on that. Now somebody blamed me for that and they were right, but they didn't see me when I was trying - John Dancy was like that. He did a lot of things and he had good relationships.

K: He did nothing with Ford. He never could. He mentions in three or four different letters. Nothing was done with Don Marshall.

C: Yes, but he had some influence - remember, John was a Republican.

K: Oh, yes!

C: And he got money for Negroes and many personal honors - he was one of the few Negroes invited to their homes.

K: Of course, Henry Ford gave to Father Daniels' church, and Don Marshall taught Sunday School there.

C: Ford worshiped there every Easter Sunday morning. They would have youngsters with good voices sing - hoping Ford would give them scholarships - he never did. But a

Mr. Barber from the Michigan Stone Company gave a scholarship after hearing a youngster sing.

K: Do you remember the day in the 20's when the League sent trucks into the Negro area to hire?

C: You mean, used Negroes as strike-breakers?

K: Well, there weren't many strikes to break, since they didn't have unions to speak of. They broke it in 1921, and 1919. One gets the impression that Dancy knew what was going on; he kept a record and had a good picture of things, and did what a person could do.

C: He did what he could. Now, there were a lot of things he couldn't get. That was all you could do - ask for them. Now he always kept close to things. He figured, "Maybe if I don't get it this year, I will next year." Just like the Detroit News, where I had some trouble, but finally got a reporter on.

K: Now, Kenny Moore was apparently the big gun in the League.

C: A white man?

K: Yes, he was here when Ray Hatcher came. Ray realized almost from the first that he wouldn't be able to get along. Of course, these were younger guys coming along.

C: All the young guys thought the old man could do more than he could. When I went there, I would know he couldn't do it. But the younger man would think he could. But John did a lot of good in his way. Negroes put too much responsibility on him - they said he could have done more, but he couldn't have.

K: Well, he did get a little set in his ways, didn't he?

C: He got a little set, but he did everything he could. He moved everything he could move. But folks didn't look at it that way. They said, "He's got that contact up there, and this one - "

M: We're just about through with the tapes now. I found this very interesting. We didn't talk about Booker T. Washington at all.

C: You can't talk to youngsters about Washington, because they're thinking of Booker T. Washington in terms of today. He did all he could at his time...