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ORAL INTERVIEW

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ROBERTA McBRIDE, INTERVIEWER
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INTERVIEWER: ROBERTA McBRIDE

INTERVIEWEE: JAMES R. NEELY

McBride: Mr. Neeley, I look on this as an opportunity to find out about some of the problems of up-grading among Negro workers in the automobile plants in the 40's during the war. I understand that you were employed at Packard Motor Company.

Neeley: That's right. From 1936 until 1946.

McBride: And did you see quite a change in the nature of the employment during that time? The number of Negro employees and the types of jobs that they were put on?

Neeley: Definitely. There was quite a change, for instance, when I became an employee I had not too long prior to that come out of high school and the first job that I was given was in the foundry proper of the Packard Motor Car Company where I was employed as a molder's helper and this was what the majority of the male Negro employees were at the time in the foundry proper and the core room and in the casting cleaning room which is also a foundry complex. All of these are directly or indirectly connected with the foundry work.

McBride: Foundry work is hot, unpleasant type work is it, for the most part?

Neeley: Decidedly the most - to the utmost degree. It is the most undesirable, the most uncomfortable, it's the dirtiest work in industry.

McBride: Now, when did the company embark upon a policy of promoting Negroes from that type of job to higher classifications?

Neeley: Not until the war years of early 1943 at the issuance of President Roosevelt's proclamation dealing with fair employment

practices and upgrading practices in industry, those industries that were involved in the manufacture of war products, war goods.

McBride: What was Packard manufacturing?

Neeley: At that time Packard was manufacturing the Rolls Royce engine for the Air Force and also PT boat motors for the armed forces of the United States.

McBride: As I understand it they got one of the very first such contracts; the first in the area, perhaps?

Neeley: I believe they were among the very first.

McBride: So that means that they had a lot of new workers to incorporate into their former structure. A lot of these came from the south?

Neeley: Both Negro and white, male and female.

McBride: Now, I notice that when I went back and read articles from the Michigan Chronicle or the Courier they kept referring to troubles at Packard and I wondered why that was. So I suppose..?

Neeley: Well, I think that primarily some of the problems can be laid at the door of the company and their hiring practice. First of all of denoting the race of the employee on the application forms and secondly of arbitrarily assigning Negro men and women to the most menial tasks and also the most undesirable tasks. I think that this laid the ground work for the reluctance on the part of the majority of the white workers, male and female, to accept Negro workers as equal, even as participants, really.

McBride: Did the company try to rationalize that practice of always putting Negroes on the low classifications?

Neeley: You mean did they attempt to explain it as to why?

McBride: Yes.

Neeley: In the majority of instances I am of the opinion that they used the excuse of Negro male and female employees not being qualified.

McBride: Was there truth in that? Were the whites any better qualified?

Neeley: Not to any particular great degree and this was except for exposure to a particular type of thing which a Negro worker as well as a white worker would have to have some exposure in order to find out the mechanics of doing a job. Now, this was proven after the President's proclamation when Negroes, both male and female employees, went into the various classifications in the various categories and performed as well as the whites who had been exposed to it over a much longer period of time.

McBride: Now, what was the first such episode that involved difficulties - friction between the races?

Neeley: I believe the thing that triggered the succession of events, was first of all, after the President's issuance of the proclamation, the hiring, the specific hiring by the company of three Negro women of adequate educational background to go into a machine area where 90 or 95% of the employees there were women. At the time problems broke out to the extent of work stoppages and disagreements over the proposition that the female employees both Negro and whites should use the same rest rooms. I believe that this is what triggered the ultimate major strike within itself. Of course, this was a matter

that was eventually settled on the premise that prior to this time the disagreement with the white female employees to use the same restroom. These same rest rooms had been the assignment in the main of Negro female employees who had cleaned them and kept them orderly and prepared them for usage by the white female employees. The irony of it is that the Negro female employee was clean enough to keep them clean but the implication was that they weren't clean enough to use them along with the female white employees. And I think this raised quite a bit of resentment among the male employees both Negro and white. I think the Negro male employee resented it because it was an untruth, an untrue implication. I think the white male resented it because it was a circumstance that obviously the white female employee was going to have to live with.

McBride: What was done to counter the situation then? You say the three Negro women were promoted to this assignment; were there walk-outs then by some of the white women or what?

Neeley: There were work stoppages. Sporadic interruptions. Nothing of a major nature. It eventually was resolved because of the kind of pressures brought to bear. Both the company and the union in unison went to work to tackle the problems involved and to get them solved. It was not until sometime later that the major issues of upgrading, promotions, better jobs involving Negroes triggered the hate strike within itself.

McBride: A little bit later than that period, 1944 or so?

Neeley: Yes. All of this action took place in 1944. Some time later the upgrading process was put into effect and promotional opportunities were given to qualified Negro male employees and as a result this

triggered a strike by the white employees.

McBride: I think I've heard of a famous meeting at Cass Tech, Union officers from the International being in and many Packard employees. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

Neeley: Well, it was a very hot meeting. I might say this, because of, in spite of the fact that there had been much attempt at conditions of the employees, I believe because of the heavy influx of the southern white workers and the reluctance to accept these changes. It was very hot and the union officials, authorities did a tremendous job of selling at this meeting, and it was necessary because even at the conclusion of this meeting there was not complete acceptance of this new proposition.

McBride: Walkouts by some of the persons in the audience, I understand and all of that was —

Neeley: To a great degree. It was just a thing that was unheard of, that was unacceptable and to a great degree it was indicated they would have none of it. Of course in the preceding weeks of confrontation with those who were dissident, and disgruntled the process worked out to the extent that peace was restored and of course the labor bit, and in a matter of days the circumstances then triggered another reaction that brought about a Negro strike.

McBride: Oh? How was that?

Neeley: Well, there was much disagreement with the speed of the promotion of Negroes to certain jobs; there was much disagreement as to the effort to open doors that had previously been closed. Some felt that it was taking too much time; proper progress was not being made in the face of the previous white strike against Negro employees. I believe that they had a reciprocal reaction where the Negro employee

felt that they can do this to us in the face of the slowness of implementing complete implementation of the program then we can also show dissatisfaction and retaliate in this fashion.

McBride: Did the Negroes gain anything from their strike?

Neeley: I'm certain that they did because as I recall there was a meeting shortly after this walkout in which Herman Strong, who was the coordinator, administrator with the Government's program in the midwest area, I believe, had to make definite commitments for speeding up the program of eliminating these areas of disagreement for Negro employees. I believe it had a very very telling effect. Of course, the Negroes finally went back to work and seemingly through the ensuing years there was much more compatable atmosphere, and the program did, I believe, exceed expectations, prior expectations.

McBride: Now, this was the year 1943 which was also the year of the race riot? Did that have any particular effect on the plant or were there results from that that were interesting?

Neeley: We had reason to believe those of us who were close to the picture that the race riot to some degree had the situation at Packard we believe fed this flame that finally erupted. It was a contributing factor to the community atmosphere.

McBride: Now, the friction to the extent of continued wild cat strikes continued into the next year? How was it finally resolved?

Neeley: It finally was resolved after a number of months, the exact number I don't recall but it must have been certainly six or seven months duration before there finally came a clearing of the air, the atmosphere and the complete acceptance of the program and the

implementation of the program and the meeting had a satisfactory attitude on the part of those involved, both Negro and white. The job had been well done and had solved the many problems of.....

McBride: Now how would you characterize the role of the union through this period? Did they take a strong stand?

Neeley: Definitely so. It was much work done first of all from the standpoint of influencing the President's position because this was a matter that had national significance, naturally because of the war time activity and the union was in the forefront of this battle all the way. There was a complete dedication to moving forth with the problem.....

McBride: It took really not only the union but the government and the company too?

Neeley: The union and the government and the company. It also took complete dedication of UAW members to bring this to a fruitful conclusion.

McBride: Now we've been talking about the general stand of the union through this period, let's hear about your own role with the union then?

Neeley: Well, my own role, I feel was minimal and not to any great degree a forceful one but I was on occasions assigned or selected to talk to members of both groups and on occasions I met also with the military authorities in the area.

McBride: What was your official title then?

Neeley: I was a chief steward in the core room.

McBride: What does a chief steward do?

Neeley: The chief steward handles the grievance procedures for the employees involved in this specific area.

McBride: He's the union's representative?

Neeley: That's right. It was necessary for us to meet with both groups, both Negro and white.

McBride: Separately or together?

Neeley: It was necessary to meet separately because antagonisms were so high at the time from both sides until it would have been an impossibility to offer any joint meetings in the initial stages at the consultations?

McBride? How was that antagonism shown? What would be some evidences of it?

Neeley: Evidences of it would be a complete rejection of any sort of normal meetings between the two groups for the elimination of the problems. Antagonisms were so high you can say you got a violent reaction in the majority of the instances where members of the two groups came together.

McBride: Would a Negro and a white be working on the production line side by side?

Neeley: In some areas but in these meetings that were called it was necessary in these instance to call these men off the job; on a couple of occasions it was necessary to go into different areas in the plant and to speak with the groups of people pertaining to what was required the requirement of the President's proclamation, requirements of the laws and to accept certain changes and to understand what their obligations were to implement them to try to create the kind of respect, and respect for the races between them; there were individual instances where there

were charges and counter charges of misconduct: sometimes the Negro worker would make this charge against his white counterpart and sometimes vice versa, a white worker would make his charge against a Negro worker. In the main we found out that many of these so called grievances or disagreements were imaginary that sprang from antagonism, misunderstanding between the members of the two groups.

McBride: Mr. Neeley, I'm interested in some evidences of the regular promotion for Negro versus white employees at that time. What about your own progress on the job? Were you hired in at a low classification?

Neeley: That's right. As a molder's helper.

McBride: Yes.

Neeley: And fortunately I was not required to remain on this job a great length of time because of a weight problem. I was weighing approximately 140 pounds at this time. The molds that I was assigned to help make, to help the molder make weighed approximately 300 to 350 pounds (that's including the cast.) A lot of the moving about of these molds was manual and because of my being ill equipped weightwise I was eventually given an opportunity to go to the job of a core handler which actually required me to place racks of cores after they had been made by the coremakers into large ovens where they were baked to a hardness sufficient for them to be used in the molding operation which is necessary prior to the pouring of the metal. I stayed on this particular job with a pretty good idea that this was "it" as far as I could go in the core room until the President's order of 1943 came out. At this stage I was given a chance to move

into the classification of core maker. This does not mean that there were not Negroes in this classification because there were. There were both male and female in this classification but their numbers were few.

McBride: And after the order?

Neeley: Many improvements were made. Persons were given opportunity for promotion on these jobs for upgrading on his ability to perform. Of particular significance to me was that they had a classification in this core making area as an inspector. Prior to the presidential proclamation there were no Negro inspectors. After the presidential proclamation there were numerous promotions into the inspector classification for Negro male and female employees.

McBride: That would be a much more pleasant job, wouldn't it?

Neeley: More pleasant job. A higher paying job. A job that made more demands on the individual employee. It was necessary for him to be alert, to be learned about what the requirements were in putting these parts together, these cores together.

McBride: Then when you were elected chief steward you had occupied the position of inspector?

Neeley: No. I was never upgraded to inspector. I had gone as far as core maker at the time that I became chief steward. I had no doubts that this would have been the next move had not circumstances as they developed and elected to the job of chief steward.

McBride: Is core maker and inspector...would you classify those as semi-skilled jobs?

Neeley: Yes, I believe to a degree because it did require some knowledge of the sand you were working with and of the nature of the ingredients of the sand. A number of ingredients went into the sand in its raw stage before it was put into what is known as the core boxes to form. Then it would be necessary for you, some time, with the feel of your fingers to determine whether the moisture content was of sufficient nature to make a good core or whether or not you would make scrap because of the improper ingredients. It was necessary to know how to open the boxes so as not to scrap the cores, how not to cut the excess off them and to a degree I would say that it is a semi-skilled area. Of course there were some who did not because of less dexterity with their hands and not so quick in picking up the knowledge in how to do these things who just could not do it. Some people did not remain in this classification because of their inability to adapt to the requirements on the job.

McBride: Does that job still exist in the auto plants now?

Neeley: Oh yes. It is much less complicated today than in those years because much of this work was manual and today they have a more mechanized process of doing this. It eliminates some of the things we talked about a while ago that was the individual core man's responsibility to know the texture of the sand to know whether the proper amounts of the proper oils and so forth would have gone into this raw product. Now this is all done in mechanical sinks and much less complicated I believe.

McBride: Does the Negro still have any problem getting into that classification in the plants?

Neeley: Definitely not. I am of the opinion in the main that in this particular area, foundry positions, I would say that opportunities are more open there than in other areas in industry. Because tradition, you must understand, that the foundry was where the Negro went traditionally for the years he was given a job of employment and previous years this is where he went to the foundry. But today these practices have changed; I think in the main, with some exceptions, of course, that the individual is given a chance of promotion on the basis of his ability and it's a much different picture today.

McBride: You give the union credit for making that change?

Neeley: Definitely. I think that without the understanding and the dedication of and the policies of the union it just would not have been possible to bring about this understanding and acceptance of each other among the races.

McBride: Let's hear of your own work history now, Mr. Neeley.

Neeley: Well, when I graduated from high school here in the city of Detroit I had to debate really because of the fact that I came from a large family where my mother and father were not together and it was necessary for my mother to care for myself and for the children. I had to make a determination as to whether or not I should make an attempt to further my education, possibly working part time during the school or whether I should attempt to alleviate the conditions under which I had seen my mother struggle with my brothers, my sisters and myself over the years. The most practical thing I could do was to seek a job. I counseled

with my teachers and with my principal and made them aware of the fact that I had decided that possibly I had better try to get a job and alleviate this condition so that my mother would not be required to do what I had seen her do through the years. After much contact between us it was finally decided that maybe this was the best course for me to take and that because of the recognized hiring policies that I should go seeking employment with four other youths who were white, by the way, and this was done on the assumption that if we went together that my chances for being one who would be given a job would be much better. We were all given letters of recommendation and we went from plant to plant here in the metropolitan area of Detroit. Employment demands were not high at the time. Some places were giving few jobs. Over a period of a great number of months slowly but surely my colleagues were picked off one by one in the various plants until finally I was left alone still seeking employment.

McBride: That was the four white lads who got jobs?

Neeley: Yes. They were the four white lads who were intermittently picked off and after a couple of months there were four of us going, then three of us going, the number finally dwindled down to myself and I finally found after deep attempts to get a job at Packard. By some stroke of fortune I was given a job just before Christmas, before the Christmas holidays of 1936. I began to wonder about the difficulties of my, as a Negro youth finding employment what I could do and I began to give much thought to the fact that I had the kind of experience I had with my four white school mates who were intermittently given jobs and finally finding myself the only one without.

I wondered what the difference was and why this was and I began to seek answers; slowly but surely the answers came to me that something was wrong that the policies of those who were in position to reach out to give a job to those who were seeking jobs there was something wrong; and I became exposed to the union drive which was going on at Packard Motor Car Company at the time and I began to listen to the philosophies expounded in the foundry, about some of the evils that I had faced myself. And I thought that this is what I must do, knowing that these conditions exist - better that now that I have a job that I do a step further and not be satisfied and do something about those who are going to come after me. And from that point on I have been concerned about my union first of all and concerned about what my union do for people. Briefly this is it. I can't add much to it.

McBride: In 1936 were there any penalties invoked on people who did take an active part in unions? Was the union recognized at Packards?

Neeley: Definitely not. The attempts at organizing had to be secret. You could not, in the early stages of the efforts at Packard identify with the movement at all because if you did you were going to lose your job, You were going to be fired. Sometime immediately after I became employed there I presumed the handwriting on the wall was recognized and not too long after I was there we began to develop this attitude to come out were definitely going to suffer the loss of your job if you could be identified with this activity.

McBride: Had your father had any contact with unions? Did you have a union history of any kind in your family?

Neeley: No. I was born in the south. I was born in the state of Georgia and after the separation of my mother and father we came and settled in Detroit when I was 4 years old. My father was a minister. This definitely did not bring any background to me pertaining to the position I took as far as labor is concerned. I'd say that my mother was a dedicated woman who, for a period of time, with two years of college did some teaching in the south and who after a few years of teaching accepted an assignment as a missionary in Liberia, Africa, prior to her marriage and she was there for a number of years. She came back with a wealth of knowledge about what effect the black people could be looked upon to have in the future of the world. I might say that she gave me any basic inclinations toward my labor background because it was necessary for her, in spite of the fact that she was qualified to teach in the south, it was necessary when we left the south for her to take menial jobs and in many cases meaningless jobs in order to survive and I think any real deep feelings of depth that I have in this field is that which she related to me. Being a Negress she lost a job, a very good job I might say, in Atlanta which really triggered our having to leave there because of our economic plight. She lost this job because she would not submit to certain demands that were made on her that were not made on her white counterparts. I might say that she was working for the Pullman Company in Atlanta when this specific incident took place. I would feel that any inclination that I had prior to the time that this full recognition on my part opportunities were not equal for all people at the

conclusion of my high school graduation any further inclination toward the attempt to help to eliminate some of the injustices came from experiences brought to me and told to me by my mother.

McBride: Is your mother still alive?

Neeley: No. She died in 1943 immediately after the riots.

McBride: How do you look on the civil rights movement now? What do you see as probable trend of future events?

Neeley: I see the necessity for re-evaluating the approach to the establishment of equal opportunity and the elimination of discriminatory segregatory practices in the nation. I feel that there are many things happening to people both Negro and white that make it necessary for those who can help to reshape our area. Makes it mandatory that they go forth with this effort to eliminate these injustices to people; I think it takes on a rather significant role when many of the people that you talk to now say that rather than to be content with circumstances as they are and to live with them and to recognize that I'm not a whole person, I can't conduct myself as a whole person, I can't feel as a whole person, and I must agree that for one to accept the circumstance that he is going to be half a man that she is going to be half a woman some of them would not just be and I can understand this. It think it is an insult to dignity of mankind to ask that a certain segment of us be required to be less than whole. It is unjust I think that recognition of this must be made and adjustments must be made. I feel deeply on this question because I feel that may of the ills that affect our country really can be eliminated with the recognition that all citizens should be whole and they should be put into position to make a full contribution to our society. I think that our

economic plight is one that most of us are out of stock in is one area in which complete full citizenship for all people of the nation certainly will eliminate. I can see this, if I see no other gains I feel, too, that the non-acceptance of the white and black will be dealt with a devastating blow. When people are equally prepared in the economic strata to culturally and educationally prepare themselves to live with their neighbors. I recognize that a lot of the non-acceptance comes from the inability of the Negro to properly prepare himself culturally and educationally in his formative years and there are a number of reasons for this. His father is not able to pursue the kind of monetary advantages that will allow him to give his children wholesome, necessary surroundings in the home.. does not allow him to pursue higher education so that a full contribution can be made to our society. I feel that with the acquisition of this kind of opportunity to properly prepare one whether he be Negro or white and I understand that this is not an affliction of the Negro by himself, it's a major affliction of the Negro, is also of the poor whites . I believe in full participation in our society with the opportunity to prepare oneself to make a full contribution to our society is going to make our society a much better one in which to live.

McBride: Do you think that a separate Negro state, the south for instance is the solution to our problems?

Neeley: I definitely do not. As long as I have been able to understand what the evils of segregation and discrimination are I have fought against it. I have fought for inclusion into the mainstream of American life. I have fought for elimination of the evils that

that would separate people. I see nothing but antagonisms and dissatisfactions and complete non-acceptance of a nation of people that must live together. I am not,by any stretch of the imagination, in favor of any form of segregation in our society. I think that the only way the recognition of people can be brought forth respectfully established among people is that they expose themselves to one another and learn to respect one another.

McBride: Are you in general hopeful that America can conquer our problems?

Neeley: I am positive that America can conquer this problem. It is going to take a lot of doing. It is going to take complete dedication of a lot of men with good will. I am positive that America has the capacity to bring this about. I am positive that America recognizes that it must bring this about.

McBride: Do you have a question that you'd like to ask at this point? Thank you very much. You've contributed substantially to our record.