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ORAL INTERVIEW

C. LEBRON SIMMONS

NORMAN McRAE, INTERVIEWER
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Wayne State University
Detroit, Michigan

An interview with Mr. C. Lebran Simmons
Interviewed by Norman McRae ca. 1969

McRae: Mr. Simmons, would you tell me something about your life? Your early background and your life between 1935 and 1945?

Simmons: In 1935, I graduated from law school and passed the bar, and was admitted to practice, and opened an office at 585 Gratiot Avenue, Detroit, Michigan, and practiced until 1944, when I was appointed as Assistant Prosecutor for the County of Wayne, and I served as an Assistant Prosecutor until 1947, when we lost recount to the Republican Party. And then I went back into private practice. The early part of '36, I became active in the formation of the Detroit Chapter of the National Negro Congress, which I was the President. The Congress was formed for the purpose of actively organizing black people in this community for the purpose of securing their rights, civil rights, that is their full rights as citizens of the United States of America as guaranteed by the United States Constitution. And that the National Negro Congress participated... INTERFERENCE... that the Sojourner Truth Housing Project, which was named after the great Negro woman fighter, was built on Nevada and Fineland in northeast Detroit, and was built and allocated by the federal authorities for Negro occupancy, and because of the complaints of the white citizens in the community, they decided to change the designation as to occupancy, and turn it over for white occupancy, and this was prior to the recent as to fair housing, so that there was organized in this community and in the city of Detroit, the Sojourner Truth Housing Committee, in which Reverend Charles Hill was the Chairman. It was organized independently of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, but the NAACP did participate in the committee's activities. But, primarily, the work was done by Reverend Charles Hill, the citizens' federation, I think it was called the Civil Rights Federation, rather than Civil Rights Congress...

McRae: at that time...

Simmons: Yeah, it was called the Civil Rights Federation, of which Jack Raskin was the Chairman. The League of Women Voters,

quite a few of the churches, and the National Negro Congress. Reverend Hill, myself as the President of the National Negro Congress, the Civil Rights Congress with Jack Raskin, and the, I would say, the benign support of the NAACP. We carried on a real campaign. And this was developed especially after they tried to move the Negro families into the project. When they tried to put in the first Negro occupants, there was a riot. The white people in that community overturned automobiles, trucks, and stoned and attacked all the Negroes in the area. As a result, the police from the corner station came up and arrested, wholesalely, practically all the black people who were participating in trying to get these people in the Sojourner Truth Housing project. So as a result, the Sojourner Truth Committee was organized by Reverend Hill, myself, McClendon, Dr. J.J. McCledon, who was the President of the NAACP here, Jack Raskin, the Chairman of the Civil Rights Federation, and we provided the legal defense, myself and Judge Davenport. At that time, he was in private practice. Davenport and myself tried on an average of between 35 and 40 cases a day.

McRae: For how long?

Simmons: For about a week. And we were threatened with contempt of court by one of the judges, because we had advised some of the defendants to ask for a jury trial, and the judge, in open court, called us up to the bench, and told us that if we went down to the bull pen again, and advised any of those prisoners about asking for a jury trial, he was going to put us in jail for contempt. Most of the cases, men were either sent to the Detroit House of Correction, and later... now, my memory is rather... I forgot as to what happened, but I remember the Judge Maher, John J. Maher, as the result of the intervention of Charlie Jones, wholesalely granted new trails to most of these people and freedom. But now as far as the fight to change the occupancy of the Sojourner Truth project, Mayor Jeffries was the Mayor of eht City of Detroit at that time, a man by the name of Rudolph was the Congressman from the first district in which the project was located. He brought pressure to bear, claiming that all of these people were outside agitators, primarily reds, communists, and every other kind of subversive, as he

called them, agitators who were inciting these people to fight for their rights. So that he was trying to bring pressure so that letters and meetings were held all over the city of Detroit, organizing the people, and we led a delegation down to the Mayor's office, finally putting some backbone into the Mayor, so that he came out finally and urged the federal government to reverse its stand and grant the Sojourner Truth Housing project back to black folks.

And this was done. And that the necessary precautions should be made toward seeing to it that the occupancy of the newcomers into the project would be safe, so that, as a result, the army was brought into Detroit, and they moved into the housing project. But I think that the thing that is important is this, to me, was the beginning of the development of the kind of unity that was... that did exist and was characterized by the combined support of the black community in the attempt to elect Richard Austin as Mayor of the City of Detroit. So that, even at that time, most of us did not see the ultimate result of organizing and fighting for rights of black folks to participate and function in their government, and that it was their life, and it was incumbent upon black folks to fight if they expected to get anything, and, as a result, I think those of us who have lived through this period can see the results of the early struggle in organizing the people here in the city of Detroit in the fight for their freedom, and this was one of the early incidents in which the National Negro Congress participated, and the National Negro Congress together with the Civil Rights Congress was in the forefront of those organizations who took the initiative, rather than waiting to see what the government officials were going to do. We initiated programs and activities, and I suppose that's why they called us agitators. Because we felt that the time had come when black folks could not sit by and wait for their rights to be handed to them, but to get up off of their behinds and do something about it. So we started people to moving in this direction. The National Negro Congress was instrumental in helping to

organize the CIO. Every one of them, except the National Negro Congress. The organized churches. I remember going to a meeting trying to raise funds to help defend a boy charged with rape, in which I and another young man from the Civil Rights Congress were defending.

McRae: What was his name?

Simmons: I can't remember his name. Were defending, and, ... you mean the young man who was charged with rape?

McRae: Yes. Can you think of the lawyer?

Simmons: I can't think of the lawyer's name or this boy's name. If I think about it, I'll call you and tell you.

McRae: Okay.

Simmons: But anyway, I went up to Shiloh Baptist church, to a meeting of the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance. It was just Baptist Ministerial Alliance, where Reverend Rawles, who was the President at that time and who had been appointed... he wasn't the President, but he had been appointed by the President to go out and interview the forward management as to what recommendation that he should bring back to these preachers so that they could tell the black folks in this community what to do. I was there on a different mission, but, naturally, I couldn't let this man's report, which was that the black folks at Ford should join the American Federation of Labor. I had been a Teamster, and I was familiar with the practices of the American Federation of Labor. So, instead of me raising any money, I took an opportunity to speak against this preacher. And I told him that I couldn't imagine a black preacher coming to a black audience and recommending that, in preference to the Congress for Industrial Organization, whose whole philosophy and program were so contradictory to the practices of the AFL, would have the gall and the nerve to come to his people and urge his people to support the AFL. Knowing their history. So, naturally, I didn't get any money for my purpose, and the only minister there that supported me was Reverend Hill. But, at least, I think that we were able to alert these people to what was happening. So, I told them that, in spite of what they were saying and who they supported, that the CIO were going to organize the Ford Motor Company. Because, at this time, the CIO was carying on, it was in 1936 or '37,

were carrying on this struggle. (PHONE RINGS.) And so that the National Negro Congress, and especially me at this meeting, weren't able to recruit anybody, if I can remember, but, at least, I think I was later informed that the committee did not go on record and adopt Reverend Rawles' report. But, nevertheless, we went ahead and defended the man, even though we didn't get paid any money. So that the National Negro Congress was the leader during this period, and any progressive action that meant the advancement, the forward advancement of Negroes, rather than following the same old patterns that had been staked out before. That is, any new grounds were broken, the National Negro Congress, together with the Civil Rights Congress, was doing it. In other words, most of the progressive black folks in this community, from 1936 until 1950, were found in the National Negro Congress. The most progressive white folks were found in the Civil Rights Congress, until the, I think it was the McCarthy period, when attacks were being levelled on that National Negro Congress, Civil Rights Congress, and, even though they both were oriented toward labor, and labor backed, the labor had become sort of conservative and had failed to give its backing and its continuous support, because labor itself had now, had developed a foothold, had become rooted in the community, so therefore they didn't need the initiative, the springboard, of organizations like the Civil Rights Congress or the National Negro Congress.

McRae: This was point made by Mrs. Macki, that they needed them in the '30's...

Simmons: Right.

McRae: ... but, after the 1940's, they no longer needed you.

Simmons: Yeah, because they'd become established. They had become established; they had become respected. So they began to take over, not... because, once that they had organized themselves, they had adopted some of the same things that the establishment had adopted. ????? black folks; they did not give black folks positions in their organizations, so that when we continued to struggle and to fight for them to democracize their organizations to the point of where black folks would have a position in it commensurate with their strength in the union, then we were the

rebels. Even though we had been the forbears of the union. So this, I mean, this is the thing that, I guess, constantly happened. I know some of the very people who had been the leaders and who had walked on the picket line with me, on the picket lines at Budwheel, at Chevrolet Gear and Axle, and at Chevrolet, and at Kelsey-Hayes in this city, were the ones who did not receive any of the fruits of the organization of the CIO, in the unionization of these particular plants. We were the guys out there in the cold and the rain and the snow, and urging and insisting that, as far as the future of these folks in the union were concerned, it had to be in the CIO. But see, all this was lost and forgotten.

McRae: Could you tell me why, and what more or less... or was there a particular incident, I should say, that made you want to join the National Negro Congress: Did you help to form it, also?

Simmons: Yes. I was in Philadelphia when the first convention was held, in 1936, Well, I guess all my life I have been in the forefront of the struggle for black rights, black participation in the government. I guess because I got it from my father.

McRae: Tell me something about your father.

Simmons: My daddy, who is still living, is 87 years old. He's a Spanish-American War veteran. He was a leader in his church, Bethelame Church. When we came to Detroit he was uneducated; he finished the eigth grade in Detroit. But he always wanted his children to have an education. So myself, my brother John, my sister Jessie, were sent to the University of Michigan. I worked in the summer; my brother never worked; and neither did my sister, but my sister went to Ypsilanti to school. We both finished the University of Michigan. And I finished the University of Michigan in 1930, at the height of the Depression. But we finished, and it was all because of my mother and father, who insisted on us getting an education, so that, as a result of my background and my father's belief that black folks had to fight for what they get, that anything that offered an opportunity for black folks to move forward, I participated in it. So that, even in... I was a member of the NAACP for a long time. And, I guess one of the reasons I gravitated toward the National Negro Congress, we tried to elect Reverend Hill as President

of the NAACP, and they said that we were a bunch of radicals trying to take over the NAACP, and he was defeated and Dr. McClendon became the President, so that when the National Negro Congress ... Davis, came to Detroit to seek people, I don't know how he got my name, but he came to my office and asked me would I be interested in helping to find the organization that wanted to go all out in the struggle for the freedom of black folks. So I said yes. So that we called together a group of people, Coleman Young, who was a young man at that time, Coleman Young, James Walker, Paul Kirk, Arthur McFall, who wasn't too active, myself, and some women, whose names I can't remember.

McRae: Wasn't one of the _____ Vandenburg?

Simmons: Yeah! Vira Vandenburg. Some older women, who participated in the formation of the National Negro Congress, here. Local chapter of the National Negro Congress, here. And we went to Philadelphia to the first meeting, where Afram Brandau was elected as the first President. So we came back to Detroit, all enthused, and they started meeting in my office until we were able to get a small group of people and get together with some of the people from the trades Unions, and we were able to get sufficient funds to open up an office at Erskin and John R. And there we started a campaign first to make them put in a swimming pool in Miller High School, it was an intermediate school they had just turned into a high school that had no swimming pool, and ????? that was sufficiently large to even ask the parents of the graduating class to come in to see their children graduate. So that we demanded a hearing before the Board of Education and they promised us that they were going to build a swimming pool, which they eventually did, and which they eventually enlarged the auditorium. We also started a campaign against housing. The city of Hamtramck had built a housing project, and in this project they had not allowed any places for black folks. So that Elvin Davenport, who is now a judge in Recorder's Court... (INTERFERENCE)... so that Davenport and I were the lawyers who started a lawsuit against the Hamtramck Housing Commission

which would be tried by a judge by the name of Judge Miller, who did not believe in any Civil Rights, but who wanted to embarrass the Democratic Party, we didn't care what his reasons were, but he granted us an injunction and restrained the Hamtramck Housing Commission for putting anybody in 10% of those units out there. And those units remained vacant for about 10 or 12 years. Nobody living in them. They wouldn't violate the injunction by trying to put anybody in them but neither would they put any black folks in the housing project. And this was done by the National Negro Congress and the Civil Rights Congress. And this was in the early days. Now, just imagine. I guess this is why I don't have any money now. Davenport and I tried that law suit, and didn't get a dime, not a nickel. And just like during that period, we tried all those riot cases, we weren't paid. Not a quarter. We just represented those people. So that I think that the National Negro Congress and the Civil Rights Congress really made an impression here in making some deep roots in the minds of people about fighting to secure their rights. Now, I ask specific instances... unless you can ask me some questions, I can't remember.

McRae: Okay, well, what part did Ed Tolan play?

Simmons: Oh! Ed Tolan was right... he was in the National Negro Congress, not in the beginning, but later on, he came in and participated fully. And that's the man with the world-wide reputation that Eddy had, lended credence and gave status to the organization, and he was an active member of the National Negro Congress. He did whatever he could do in helping us raise money, maintain our headquarters in the office. But I'm not certain that Eddy was one of those who paraded down there in front of the Housing Commission when we were picketing the Housing Commission about this project or not; I'm not certain. But I do know that he was a member and was active.

McRae; Alright. As a lawyer, would you tell me something about police brutality, as you saw it between '35 and '45? I mean, you know, some... you know, as a lawyer, how would you view it?

Simmons: Well, first place, there wasn't the, as the old saying goes, when an idea's time has come, nothing can stop it. It wasn't time at this period in the history of the city of Detroit for them to become positive in their action towards removing police brutality. There were complaints made, constantly complaints being made about the police, but there was no effort made, there was no civil rights organization in the sense of the Civil Rights Commission; there was no police complaint bureau, as they have established now, to try to ease the complaints, the insistent complaints of black folks, because black folks didn't have any organization to force it. The National Negro Congress was a minority group organization. The philosophy of the city, the whole atmosphere of this community, was not conducive to a real struggle against police brutality. When I say that, I'm not saying that there were not complaints made. But all I'm saying is that no real attention was given toward changing the attitude of the police with reference to police... problems of police brutality. The NAACP, especially, was carrying on a whole campaign against police brutality. But, in effect, not until recently has there been any action that has been done toward removing the problem.

McRae: Can you... you said the whole philosophy of the city... can you tell me why the philosophy was ??????, in your opinion?

Simmons: Well, I would say the philosophy was the same way as it was all over the country. That in 1930 and '36 they had not developed that kind of respect for black folks because, and I think the reason is because black folks themselves were not unified, and if I were able to say anything about this period, black folks was interested primarily in becoming white. Becoming part of the establishment without developing what had primarily belonged to them, developing their own status. To become an entity in themselves, to know that they had made some contribution to this country and demand from this country their right to keep their own concept of themselves as a people, and they were so highly concerned about aping white folks, and they felt that, if a black man made a complaint against the police, unless it was so obvious, the black folks as a

one day... I was President of the Michigan Federation of Democratic Clubs, and we had conducted a real campaign. I had organized a meeting over on the west side, at McGraw and Milford, at the playground there. But we had approximately, I would say, 5 or 6 thousand people there. And the Democratic nominee for the Prosecutor's office, O'Brien, and because of the pressure of my club, the Democratic Club, called me in and asked me would I accept a position as Assistant Prosecutor. I had not had too much criminal practice, and I said Yes, I would like to have it, so I can get the experience. I wasn't in there for two months before he say... he called me in and told me that the Catholic organization, I think it was, had called him in and asked him, did he know that he had hired a Red, a communist, and asked me was I a member of any organization like that. And I refused to answer. I told him that he didn't ask me that when I was out there working for him for Prosecutor. He hadn't asked me these questions when he offered me the job. And I said, "Let me tell you this: I was living before I came to this office. Now, if you feel that I would be a hindrance to you, then I'll quit it now." And he said, "Oh, no, no, I don't want you to quit." But when he ran again, when he asked me to come in and work for him, I told him No. And the reason I told him No because it was during the McCarthy period, and I knew that if I went in that office that in the struggles that were ahead of me, that I would be back in and asked of my activities. Because we organized a meeting when I was in the Prosecutor's office, down there in Cadillac Square, when they lynched those four Negroes, down in Dublin, Georgia. We took four black caskets and got a permit and paraded down Brush Street, all the way downtown. And I spoke, and I was in the Prosecutor's office, and the papers, a new reporter asked me, "Do your boss know what you are out here saying today?" I told him I didn't give a damn whether my boss knew it or not. So I knew that my whole philosophy as far as black folks were concerned would not be commensurate with what the white people's attitude at that time were are now. Whether I was jeopardizing me. So I didn't go back. So that

I feel that any person who wishes to lead an independant, aggressive, non-compromising position with reference to the struggle for freedom for black folk can't accept public office in most of these states, cities. Because, if he does, he has to soft-peddle when times... when he has to take a stand on this ?? shit??. So I'll say this, I think you've asked me most of the main questions on most of my activities in this city. There might be some instances that I've omitted that I can't remember, because I suppose that come for me.