

JAMES E. BOGGS

I came here in 1937, and I came here on the freight train as most people were doing during those days. I was 18 going on 19. I graduated from high school in Bessemer, Alabama in 1937. I had brothers and uncles in Detroit. This was in the period when it was the Great Depression. The way people would travel mostly at that time, you were a hobo. Black and white and everything else. You had a very tough time being a hobo at that time primarily because they had had the Scottsboro case down south; and it was a question of, if they caught black and whites hoboeing together, they was just going to beat the hell out of Blacks. It was tough. Nevertheless myself and one of my friends from Alabama, he was from my hometown of Marion Junction, which is below Selma, him and I got on the freight train and hoboed up north. We had nothing but what we had on our backs, that's all. Didn't even have a change of clothes which we learned out later after we hoboed some more that you always take along several pair of clothes. I had about 50 cents, he had about 50 cents. We ran out of money the second day.

We bummed up to people and say, "Would you please give me something to eat?" and people would generally give you some bread and a little meat. You'd go up to the nearest house and knock on the back door. I went over to a farmer's house, and a lady gave us some cabbage and hamhocks. This is in the summer. In Cincinnati we went down to the bakery, and they gave us some cinnamon rolls and stuff. Cincinnati was a bum town at that time, bums just by the hundreds, lying around. People built a shanty town there on the river. Everyday you'd go up town to bum.

In St. Louis people took railroad cross-ties and made houses all down the Mississippi River. Sometimes you'd get on the freight train. There'd be 50 people on the freight train scattered all over, some sitting on top, some inside, some in gondolas, just riding where you could ride. The big thing you had to worry about was, when you come into a town and the freight train slowed down, everybody jumped off and walked around the town to catch the train when it would leave out the other end of town. Down south in Tennessee if they catch you, they put you on a peanut farm to pick peanuts.

I came in on a train from Toledo. Got off at the Ford River Rouge Plant, and I walked down Michigan Avenue to downtown Detroit, asking the police in Dearborn and all down that route where was Theodore and Hastings. That's where my uncle was living. I come to 940 Theodore, early in the day in June, 1937. This is the first time I had ever been to a big city. I had been to cities like in Alabama, but they wasn't nothing like Detroit. Detroit was the first big city I'd ever been to. My brothers were here. I had two brothers here and my uncle lived here. My uncle was the first Black person that worked at Budd Wheel over here on Charlevoix. So all of us thought we was going to get a job over there. I don't

know why we thought we would. We didn't get none. That's the year I came to Detroit--1937.

There's Depression all over. So what do you do? You get a job washing cars or like bums do now. Or somebody picks you up and you go out in the country somewhere and work in cabins where people had their summer cabins. I had never heard about that before until I come here. Or you'd do a little painting with somebody. Get about \$3 for a room to paint in those days. But mainly I went to car washing places. Weren't many Blacks working in the auto industry at all. Ford was the one where Blacks worked and they worked in the foundry. I used to have a cousin working at Ford. Even at that time, they was big shots. Big shots because they was always the ones who had a paycheck, getting about 25 to 26 dollars a week. At that time it was lots of money. Most people had them 10, 11 and 12 dollar a week jobs.

I went and worked on the Works Progress Administration. I worked on Orangelawn, Greenlawn, Cherrylawn, Southfield, State Street and all those streets, digging the curbstones for they put in the curbs and put in cement streets cause most all the streets was dirt roads in those days.

I went back south in 1938 and got married. Come back and still was on the WPA because there wasn't nothing here to do.

When my first kid was born I was still rooming. I paid three dollars, and the lady made me pay an extra 50 cents a week for the lights. The lights didn't cost no more than two dollars for the whole month, so I paid the whole light bill. But that's what they would do. They say you burn more light when you have a baby. At that time, most people in Detroit were rooming. Most men came here single and sent back for their families. Black and White did it. Whites were mostly coming from Europe at that time.

I lived in one house where there was one man and his wife and daughter, then me and my wife and daughter and the landlady. That's it. Anybody who had a six-room house could rent out two rooms or more to help pay the rent. Those days people were still having rent parties to help pay the rent. This was the Depression. People would go down to Eastern Market on Saturday afternoon to pick up all that food there free.

They also had a lot of soup kitchens in Detroit in those days. That's the first time I ever saw White people who were hungry. Down south nobody was hungry, not even Black folks. We always had chickens, hogs and cows down south. Down south people were ragged. We didn't have no shoes, no clothes much; but you had food. When I came to Detroit people didn't have no food. They'd be in line at the soup kitchens and soup lines. They weren't segregated.

Did 18 months in George Washington Trade School. Pattern makers and all that stuff. Well, it was about that time the war industry was starting, and I got called to Aeronautic Tool Company out on Ryan Road, but I wouldn't take it because I had got called to Chrysler, and I thought I'd make more money at Chrysler because they were going to give me 60 cents an hour as a template maker, pattern maker at this here aircraft plant. That was an apprentice program whereas at Chrysler's I got 68 cents an hour as a factory worker. Most factory workers in that day was getting about \$1.02 an hour tops for skilled trades. I eventually worked up to 98 cents an hour to \$1.02 an hour. I worked for \$1.02 an hour from 1940 until the war was over in 1945. The highest wages in Chrysler at that time was running about \$1.36 an hour and that was for a tool cutter or gear cutter in the machine shop and the skilled trade workers were getting \$1.42. All of us got less than \$2.00 an hour throughout the war with lots of overtime.

You could get a job anywhere you went. Everybody would hire you. They was getting cost plus. If Chrysler was paying you \$1.00 an hour, the government would add a dollar to it so they made \$1 off of me every hour that I was getting paid. That's what the war was doing. Therefore, the companies wanted to hire lots of folks anyway, even if they wasn't doing much work, you hired them. They was getting so much a head for every one they keep. In fact, it was hard to get fired in those days because they all wanted to keep you.

Out around Chrysler at them old houses they used to rent out, they used to rent the houses by shift, rent the rooms by shift. You slept in the bed during the morning shift and somebody else slept in it that night while you was at work.

Cost of living was lots cheaper. We had lots of money comparatively speaking. In fact, everybody saved some money during the war. That's how they bought all those houses when the war was over because people had four years there when they just worked and there wasn't nothing to buy. Didn't make no cars so didn't nobody buy them new cars. Nobody bought refrigerators and stuff like that or big heavy appliances. Nobody bought nothing but house furniture. That's why when the war was over because they had all them long hours and they'd all accumululated a little money. I accumululated some, and I didn't have all that fancy a job. During the war this town was booming because everybody was working.

I was active in the unions. I belonged to the goon squads. Our job was when there was a strike we was trying to make people join the union. Our job was to force folks to join up to the union, threaten them and certain things. More people joined the union because we forced them in the union than joined automatic. Because they didn't want to pay no dues. We told them they had to pay. Every once in a while we'd have a dues push. We'd line up out at the gate and wouldn't let them in unless they belonged to the

union. They'd go around the back and jump over the fence and go to work anyway. The next day or so, we'd go out to their house and throw bricks through there or beat the hell out of them and they'd join. That was a part of the organizing. Then we used to go out and help other locals organize.

Smaller guys than me was goons, and there was smaller women. One of the best fighters I knew, a little old woman named \_\_\_\_\_, she was smaller than you. Fought like a tomcat out there on the line. We had all different sizes.

I was very active in the union in the period when they was organizing. I guess you would say I was in the old left-wing group. I was with George Addes and R. J. Thomas. R. J. Thomas was nothing but a welder. They was all political activists because they belonged to lots of little organizations at that time. Gotta remember there was the Socialist Workers Party, Communist Party, the Labor Movement, Shackmanites, Olerites, the Wobblers, IWW. All these different groups were in the union. There was three or four different political machines inside the union struggling for power. You had lots of factions all fighting over who was going to have leadership. They wasn't divided being or not being union. They was divided on which direction should the union go. Some was a little more militant than the others. Thomas-Addes was a very militant group. Before Reuther come in we used to strike all the time, but when Reuther come in he cut the strikes out, most of them. We used to have wildcats, they called them. We sometimes had maybe 150 strikes in a year. Anytime we didn't like something, we'd walk out. That's the way we forced the issue.

Wildcats are unauthorized strikes when people just spontaneously walk out over issues. They wanted to kick so many people off the line, and you say, "Like hell, you ain't taking nobody off. We need some more."

They outlawed wildcats, made them illegal. For years we only had wildcats. That's when the union was at it's best because there was pressure all the time. Then once they got check-off, when you had to be in the union whether you wanted to join or not, it was kind of a bad thing because as long as everybody had to pay their dues each month instead of out of their pocket, they was always complaining.

Once they had check-off the union didn't have to do nothing, and it's still going to get the dues. It changed the whole tempo of the thing. A department would say, "Look, we ain't paying no dues this month unless you all get something did." That kept the union jumping like hell. The idea of having check-off was to have everybody be in the union. You had to be in the union from the day you walked into the plant and got hired. The union would have not only a steady income, but we had everybody being a unionized worker whether they wanted to be or not. But it also had a bad side to

it. The negative side was, once everybody was in the union, the union didn't have to be militant no more. Because they was going to get the dues whether they was doing anything or not. So it had its positive and negative effects.

My early experience was in the union, and that's where I got my real organizing skills--in strikes, wildcats, picketing, goon squads, stuff like that.

In 1946 the UAW set up the Fair Employment Practices Committee. The purpose of that committee was to break up discrimination in and around the plant. Not so much the hiring because at that time everybody could get hired, but putting all Black people in one particular classification or in one particular section of the plant. We was also trying to upgrade people to different skills. It was always based on seniority then. We didn't have what they got in affirmative action. We just meant that if, say, I have been working at the plant for a year, I should be able to go into skilled trades before somebody got hired off the street could go into skilled trades.

Around 46, 47, 48, 50 the Fair Practice Committee was very active. We used to go out on a Friday night downtown and picket all the different restaurants that wouldn't serve Black people. We had to go up and down Woodward Avenue. Ernest Dillard, me and him, we used to work together.

They would tell us, "We don't serve Black folks in here." So we'd file a complaint under the Diggs Act. The Diggs Act was, there should be no discrimination in Michigan under land, sea or air and all that stuff. We would go in, and we would be refused service. So we'd call the police, and we'd tell them we'd want to file a complaint.

They would say, "What you complaining about. If they don't want you over here, why don't you go over on Hastings Street and get yourself something."

We said, "We don't want to eat on Hastings. We want to eat at this place." He said, "Well, the man said he don't want to serve you."

"Yes, but the law says he has to serve us." So we'd have an argument with the police but he eventually would write up the case. Then we'd go down to 1300 Beaubien that Monday and follow-up the complaint and file the case on them. Then finally they would have to agree that they would serve us and then we would have to send back a team to see that they did serve you. We would keep going back until we'd break it up. But at that time we'd have lots of people that didn't want us in there. Even the customers in there would say, "We're going home, get our guns and run these niggers out of here," but still we stayed.

This was up and down Woodward Avenue. We broke up all the bars and eating places from downtown up to Grand Boulevard, and then we went on up as far as Clairmount because there was lots of white restaurants up on Woodward in those days that wouldn't serve Blacks.

We went to the Hotel Detrouiter. They put salt in our food. We called the manager and said it was full of salt and he'd say, "It don't taste like no salt to me." He knowed they put salt in it. Lots of times we'd go in and they'd deliberately break the glasses up in front of us to let us know they wasn't going to eat out of something some nigger ate out of. All of this took place under the Fair Employment Practices Committee working with the NAACP. This went on throughout the 50's. At the same time, we were still active in the union.

The movement didn't come until after four little girls was burned in Birmingham. That was 1963. That's when we had all the big marches all over the country. I was in all of them. I was in the march here with Martin Luther King.

That was the biggest march they ever had in the United States anywhere. Bigger than the one in Washington. They didn't say that, but we knew we had over 300,000 people. That day I was just with family. All of our friends were together. I think the union marched too, with a different group. But a lot of people didn't go with the union. They went with their own families and their block clubs. What had happened, the Blacks had organized all over the city and the churches. Reverend Cleage did lots of organizing. All of the preachers agreed that they would have a rally, and every one of their churches had a pre-march rally. That's what got out so many people.

The day that they had it, from Warren Avenue and Woodward to downtown, from Woodward over to Brush Street on one side and to Cass on the other side, it was a solid wave. Now all these people wasn't Black. Lots of Whites were there too. Then people came from the suburbs and joined in so it was a tremendous march. They marched down Woodward Avenue. It was like a Thanksgiving Parade. They marched to Cobo Hall where Reuther spoke and where King spoke, but none of us could get near there. It was just impossible. Only the people who marched up there with them actually got in at that time. I don't think that place held many people back in those days. So people stood out there on the street, on Jefferson and all the streets up there, and listened to it over the loud speaker.

The Black Movement starts in the labor movement. I think it was coming from out of the south with the belief that people ought to relate to each other better than what they were doing and a sense of believing in fair play. I was put on lots of times. When I didn't want to do something, I did it. The call got bigger than me, so I didn't get limited by, "Hell, all I have to do is take

care of Jimmy." I always knew that the world could only be made better if a lot of other people was involved in it. That I was not going to change the world by myself and, therefore, it was my responsibility to work with others or try to give some leadership to others for both of us to participate.

I was well aware of how divisive things could be when one group is torn against each other. I think by being in the labor movement, around particularly the Wobblers, I learned a deep sense of what I would call at that time class struggle, which meant that I recognized that it wasn't just a Black struggle. Blacks and Whites were in the struggle. So I come out of that too. I knew that it was important that all the different ethnic groups should struggle together. It didn't always happen that way. Those were the things that I think motivated me to try to always broaden my horizons.