(CHAPTER 2 - A CRACKER MAKES HIS POINT)

My first big break in the automobile business came after I had worked at Dodge Brother's for eleven months. This was early 1936, and again Mr. Lampkins was my benefactor. He had just arranged to put his son, Merton L. Lampkins, into a Chrysler-Plymouth dealership. I had often told him of my interest in the car business and my goal of eventually getting into the selling of cars, never dreaming that twenty-five years later I would be running my own Chrysler-Plymouth agency. In those days all Chrysler Corporation dealers also sold Plymouths, regardless of their other lines, such as Chrysler, Dodge, or DeSoto. Lampkins asked me if I would like to try selling cars for his son on a part-time basis. I said yes, but at first I kept my ten-hour-per-day Dodge job, spending a few hours nightly and all of my weekend working for the Lampkins dealership at 16330 Woodward Avenue, in a high income area of Highland Park. Highland Park, like Hamtramck, is a city within a city, completely surrounded by Detroit. Woodward Avenue is the main artery connecting Detroit with the northern suburbs.

I will never forget my first "demo," the car that salesmen use to demonstrate for potential customers. It was a shiny new black 1936 Plymouth two-door, a real honey. Walter P. Chrysler had introduced the Plymouth in 1926 to compete head-on with Ford and Chevrolet, and Plymouth was riding high as the third-ranking domestic car in terms of sales when my

career in the retail auto business began.

Merton Lampkins was a young man himself when he opened his dealership; he was perhaps in his mid-twenties. I liked the short, good-natured Merton. I was the only black salesman at his agency, and I only knew of two others in Detroit, Elwood Garvin and Jim Grant. Elwood opened a used car lot on Vernor Highway later, and he sold quite a few cars. He died early in 1978, but the lot at Linwood and Davison is now being run by a man who worked for him and still carries his name.

Lampkins had a black porter at his shop, and later he hired a black mechanic. I was the only black there, however, who had a white collar job. It wasn't really all that prestigious to begin with, but as time went on I built up a large clientele among the black community. Most of my prospects were gleaned from the workers at Dodge and their friends. Word got around that there was a black car salesman who was watching out for the interests of his buyers. It was not simply a matter of taking orders, though; I had to hustle, had to give my prospects extra services, and even had to help them with financing. I was able to gain their confidence and respect by making strictly clean deals and by my loyalty to them as customers above all else.

I "banked" my experience of nearly a year working both at Dodge Brothers' and at the Lampkins agency. That was time enough, I felt, and I could risk quitting my Dodge job to sell cars full time. I knew the money I would make selling cars

might not be as steady as my weekly paycheck from the factory, but I thought the possibility of earning more money from selling far outweighed the assured, but limited, wages I was making. More important, I knew that I could learn more in this kind of business than I could in doing routine work at the factory. The more I learned, I was, the more I could increase my own opportunities while learning more about accepting responsibility. I was determined to make a success of what was admittedly a risky undertaking for anyone -- and especially for a black man.

Lampkins made one condition that I had to live up to. I could not work on the showroom floor with white salesmen. I was told that if I worked on the floor I would be seen by prospective white buyers, and that would be bad for business. He gave me working space in the stockroom, tucked behind his office on the second floor. His office looked out over the showroom from a balcony so that he could survey his domain. You had to climb a stairway to get there, and you had to pass his office to get to mine. I purchased and brought in some office furnishings and my prospect card files. In keeping me under wraps he never thought I would become an important person in his organization. Actually, he gave me an advantage, because this meant I did not have to spend time with tire-kickers, door-slammers, and other assorted browsers.

Most blacks in Detroit lived in a small enclave during the years from 1930 to 1943, and, if they could spend money

with other blacks, spend it they did. It was relatively easy for me to work this small area drumming up business. As long as I was not selling too many cars, my efforts didn't make much difference to the white salesmen. As my business grew, however, it began to rankle them. I knew Merton Lampkins really didn't mean many of the things he said, but he began making cracks about the amount of money I was making on commissions from my sales. His salary was about $500 per month, and he kept moaning about how Ed Davis, a black salesman, was racking up more than that! One day, while I was in my office and he was on the phone, I heard him ask, "What color do you want? Black? We have them -- black as a nigger's heel." That remark bothered me, and several days later I asked him about it. He just laughed it off and said he hadn't meant anything by it. Still, his cracks, intentionally malicious or not, had an effect on the others in his agency.

As my business grew, hostility toward me also grew. Lampkin's secretary, for example, became irritated because she had to monitor prospective car buyers coming up to my office. She had a mirror in her office so that she could see people passing by on their way to see me. She complained that it took her time to tell people I was busy and that they should take a seat and wait. Sometimes I would have as many as six people waiting to see me. The boss didn't complain -- I was making lots of money for him. He kidded about my commissions outstripping his salary, but in fact his income was not from

salary alone. He owned part of the business and got a hunk of every sale I made. He kept his secretary quiet by reminding her I was selling more cars than any four of the other nine salesmen.

Finally Lampkins suggested I give up my office and work on the floor with the others. I didn't want to; I felt I would lose valuable selling time on people coming in just to look. I said no and threatened to quit if he forced me to join the others. I also was aware of and understood the hostility of the white salesmen. After all, I was outselling them by a big margin. I knew they complained that I had a nice office upstairs and a secretary (even if she was Lampkins's). What would it have been like, working with them? Lampkins said I could keep my office, which by this time was quite nicely furnished and very comfortable. Although the dealership was hiding me, it was a blessing in disguise. It forced me to adopt methods which in large measure contributed to my success throughout the following years.

I could not sell cars from this back room without people, and, to get people into my office, I had to find them and get them to trust me. I went out into the community to meet people on a personal basis. In the process I was developing trust. I built people's confidence in my honesty and fairness, a confidence matched by my faith in them. That was the only way I could build a reputation that would make people want to deal with me rather than someone else. This mutual

respect and faith in people's honesty is still the best way I know to keep old customers and attract new ones.

To be honest in what I could deliver, rather than simply sound honest in what I promised, I had to know my product. I took advantage of everything that came from the factory, reading all the literature related to my job I could get my hands on. I also enrolled in the Alexander Hamilton Institute for a two-year correspondence course in modern business, which dealt with the same subjects as a business administration major in college. In the meantime, I got out into the community to work.

When I first started at the Lampkins dealership, I had to drive about six miles to downtown Detroit to eat, usually at the Lucy Thurman YWCA, because there was no place in the neighborhood that would serve black customers. One day, however, Merton Lampkins took me to a nearby drugstore which had counter service. After eating there with him I found I could go in by myself and be served. This saved me a lot of valuable time. I would go into the dealership every day about 7:15 a.m. and work a couple of hours before going out for breakfast, and often it would be more convenient for me to stay in the neighborhood for lunch when my appointments were heavy.

I got to know some nice people at that drugstore. One white fellow lived right across Woodward from the agency. He happened to live in the same building as our sales manager. I

didn't solicit the business, but one day this man asked if I would sell him a new Plymouth. This piqued the sales manager no end and caused quite a row. Lampkins demanded that I stop soliciting business in the neighborhood. It didn't do any good to tell him I hadn't, and that the man had come to me. However, Lampkins told me to watch it and stick with the black neighborhoods. That was fine with me, for my business was growing rapidly; however, these discriminatory practices left their scars.

I found that the harder I worked, the more people were coming in to see me and to buy cars. The salesmen began exerting pressure on Lampkins to put me on the regular time schedule. Upstairs I was free to come and go as I liked, and I was earning money. This bothered them.

Much is said today about "climate," by which people mean the general economic conditions of prosperity or recession within which a business operates, the governmental regulations which affect it, and the attitudes of people, from top management on through the ranks, which set the tone of working conditions in a particular company. In general, the climate is free when there are opportunities for people to exhibit greater initiative to undertake greater responsibility and to progress on their own merit. I think I had a freer climate when I started selling cars in 1934 than any young man does today, but even then I had to keep moving. No one helped by giving me any sales training; however, I was free to try

anything I thought would help me sell cars. I was free to succeed or fail on my own. It didn't bother me that no one in the company really cared whether I succeeded or failed; I was interested in proving success to myself. I was the one who would reap the most benefits. I kept working and asking questions. Charles Steinmetz of General Electric once said, "There are no foolish questions, and no man becomes a fool until he has stopped asking questions."

The climate was fully free for me to succeed or fail by my own devices when I started out with the Lampkins agency. However, as I actually grew more successful, things changed. Where at first I was ignored, my very success created envy, irritation, and outright hostility. Mert Lampkins himself began openly to show his resentment of my success, even though every time I made $1.00 for myself I was making #3.00 for him. Of course, that was as it should be -- the agency was his and his father's investment, and my only investment was an automobile. Lampkins furnished me one car and I bought one, using both cars for demonstrations in my sales work.

Lampkins knew he was profiting on the business I brought in, but he would never admit it to my face nor, I think, to himself. I knew, however, that without the income I was bringing in he could not stay in business. It was an economic fact of life -- if I didn't make those dollars, somebody else had better do it. Economics is a strict master for a business, as well as for an individual. You've got to have

more money coming in for the work you perform than you're paying out for the things you need to function, or you simply go out of business. If you lose one man who is bringing good income into the company, you had better find another man just as good or as many men as you need to help you earn that income. That's one thing I learned. I had developed an ability that was valuable, not only to me but to the company I worked for. In so doing, I learned that I was worth something. This gave me a proportionate degree of power and a sense of self-respect for my own capabilities.

Lampkins's continuing snide remarks changed the atmosphere within the entire agency for the worse. Finally, he began to break certain business agreements we had made; tension started mounting; a collision was inevitable.

In 1937 I read that bonus checks would be issued to veterans of World War I. I thought this would mean that a lot of people who earlier could not afford a car would now have a few hundred dollars extra which they could invest in one. After talking over my idea with Mert Lampkins and settling on the dealership profit he would accept, I sold twenty to twenty-five cars to veterans. In some cases the veteran had not received his bonus check by the time the deal was closed and we were ready to make delivery. In such instances I sometimes underwrote the down payment myself, paying the dealership out of my savings. This sometimes amounted to as much as $150 on a car. When the bonus check arrived and the

owner paid the dealership, I would be reimbursed.

By this time the agency's service manager, a southern-born, hard-drinking man named Hurley, couldn't stand me anymore. He had never liked me, perhaps because of his ingrained southern prejudice against all blacks. I used to come down to the service department before breakfast and talk to the customers bringing in their cars for service, trying to interest them in a new car. Sometimes I'd drive them to work. This really annoyed Hurley. Until that time the agency's business hadn't been all that great, so he kept his hostility in check, but now that I was bringing in more sales he had to work harder. The additional cars I was selling to veterans didn't help matters; Hurley was under pressure to get even more cars ready for delivery to my customers.

Things came to a head one Friday when I got a check for my sales plus reimbursement on the down payments I had underwritten. It totaled more than $1,800, a big sum in those days. Word spread throughout the dealership. To make matters worse, the rumor had it that the amount was $3,000. It was more than a "cracker" like Hurley could take. His red nose and red neck glowed with anger.

I was not very sensitive to the tensions in the dealership. There was a reason: I felt good inside that all those veterans whose down payments I had underwritten out of my pocket had repaid me. It wasn't just the money -- I was also glad that my judgment and faith in them had been

vindicated. On that particular day I had some customers waiting for service, so I went to Hurley and asked when the cars would be ready. He was alone when I walked in. "Will that delivery for Thompson be ready this afternoon?," I asked. Hurley had told me before not to talk to him; I had been warned, but I was not prepared for what came next. He swung, hitting me in the mouth. He didn't knock me down, but I was stunned. I retaliated in the only way that I then knew. I groped for a hunk of metal nearby and I knocked him to the floor.

Lampkins ran down from his office and took control. After the many remarks He had made to help stir up things, he let his better judgment prevail. There was no probing the open wound of antagonism, no immediate condemnation of one or the other of us, no rush to judgment. The following week he called the two of us in and explained his position. "I will not tolerate any more of what happened between the two of you last week."

Hurley spoke up. "I will not work here with this guy."

"When are you leaving?," asked Lampkins.

"Now!," said Hurley.

"Your paycheck will be ready tomorrow morning."

I never expected to see Hurley again after this incident, but he came to see me when I opened my own company. As a result of our fight and the fact that he drank too much, Hurley had been fired, was blackballed, and couldn't find

another job. He asked me for work! I expressed regret that I had nothing open.

The events of these few years with Merton Lampkins had taught me some important lessons. You must fight for what you want, but honestly and forthrightly. You must overcome disadvantages by turning them to your advantage. You must learn to live with yourself and then learn to live with your fellow man. I didn't ask for the fight, and I was more embarrassed than anything else when it happened, but it worked to my advantage in the long run. Until then, nobody in the dealership respected me much; from then on they had plenty of respect. They didn't know what I'd to next. That was not the I would have chosen to win respect, but sometimes you have to fight physically to get it. The confrontation with Hurley was my first and last fistfight.

Less than a year after I left Lampkins's dealership, the laws of economics exacted their toll; his doors closed. I wasn't happy about this because I had, in an indirect way, played a part. I had no desire to see him fail. However, his own contribution to his failure was apparent.

Mert Lampkins could still be in business today, and I might still be working for him, if he had learned to get along with himself and with me, a black man. I didn't leave him because I wasn't making money. Yes, I did want to get into the automobile business, but I could have gotten into it with him. I could be running his business today and he could still

be making $3.00 for every $1.00 I made for myself, but his prejudice was keener than his desire for success. He could not learn to accept me as a man, and he finally destroyed his business.

The white man must learn to live with himself. He must try to get along with himself in relation to all human beings. There are too many people, even today, who have not learned this -- who are not even trying to learn to be honest and fair with themselves and with their fellow men. The black man can be equally guilty of festering ill will. There are good reasons for this. They are not necessarily acceptable, but the reasons are there. But any man who is secure in himself need not fear his fellow man. The man who understands who and what he is, who builds on his abilities and deals justly, both with himself and others, will prevail over anyone who seeks to hinder or repress him.

Unknowingly, I had laid the foundations for this security within myself in those early years. I found I had something to offer other men in the world of business which earned me what I wanted in return. It might have seemed insignificant at first -- for example, my willingness to do the menial chores asked of me in exchange for the chance to learn about mechanics by working in that first garage. This was only the stepping stone to a paying job at Dodge and that, in turn, led to selling cars. When I started part-time with the Lampkins dealership, he of course had nothing to lose. Any business I

brought in was so much extra. As my sales increased, however, my capabilities represented a tangible economic factor in the agency's success and my own. I knew my value.

The disadvantages of being the only black in an all-white company became advantages as I dealt with potential customers in the black community. The disadvantage of not being allowed to work on the showroom floor forced me to get out and learn to sell cars, rather than becoming an order-taker for customers who walked into the dealership. Of necessity I had to get out into the community; as a result, I got to know more people and they got to know me as a neighbor and friend. This was to prove invaluable throughout my life. Furthermore, the disadvantage of being stuck in a back room provided an impetus to my conscious efforts to build a reputation of honesty and fairness. This too has been invaluable ever since. Surprisingly, as I fixed up my inferior storage room into a nice office, it actually lent a certain prestige to the conduct of my business with buyers. I had the privacy of an office, while the men on the floor did not. By hard work I had turned debits into credits, and I gained a tremendous feeling of pride and accomplishment.

I couldn't change the growing antagonism toward me because of my success in the dealership. It was, perhaps, unavoidable that someone would start a fight. To succumb to the indignity of a blow that I had not sought to provoke would have been to forfeit my manhood without contest. I fought

back instinctively, returning a blow for a blow because that was the only way I knew then. Once another fight was in the making -- but that was twenty-five years later, and I was twenty-five years wiser. Again I was selling cars in a dealership. This time is was not a service manager, but an officer of the company who was about to strike me. He was about to lose control of his temper; I caught him and shook him by the shoulders. "If you hit me," I warned, "I hope you know what you're doing." He did not hit me; I did not hit him. The crisis passed.

There were also conflicts of a more subtle nature in the intervening years, in the insidious and potentially deadly arena of ideas. In these quiet fights I was armed with the surety that I was struggling for something I wanted, something worth "fighting" for. If you are sure of what you want, and it takes fighting for, then you fight for it. But you must make it an honest fight, and you must always try to be right. As the years passed, I realized that this ideological fight, the conflict between right and wrong, between men of different purposes, good and bad, is the unending struggle by which the events of our world are shaped. In a free society the goals each of us seek may differ, but there is no conflict if we pursue them honestly.

I do not know where Mert Lampkins is today. However, I can look back on my days with his agency and feel no animosity. After all, he did give me my start in the car

business and it was in his dealership where I served my apprenticeship before making it on my own.