

1933 ?

I've been in Detroit since June of 1937. It was the next day after Joe Louis won from Braddock. I left the night of the fight. the reason I remember that so well was that I had to borrow a suitcase and I walked across town to a friends to get it. He and I didn't have radios but the few people who had them, it seemed that they had a public service in mind, they played them loud. They wanted people to know that they had one and it also served as a public service. I could follow the fight as I walked across town. When I was on the bus the next day, down there you couldn't be talking about blacks knocking out whites. You couldn't even talk about that down there, not in a mixed group, with white people. The next morning I grabbed the bus and took off. I came from Montgomery, Alabama.

I worked at Fisher Body and while I was working there I got to be a dues collecting steward. At General Motors in that labor structure they have committee men that are recognized in the contract. I was a steward that was not recognized by the company. There was a time when you didn't have a check-off. Check-off is when the company takes your dues off. We used to have a hell of a time getting them to do that. When you join the union now you sign something and your dues is taken out of your pay. A lot of people say the union would be better if they had that now. In those days people were more eager to give because they could see unions blossoming before their eyes.

I was the first black everything in the union. Fair employment, on the executive board of the union. That plant was old, it was a Cadillac Plant, high scale, high quality car. They call it the old man's home, craftsmen worked there. There weren't any blacks. Those guys would come out at lunchtime and sit on the curb and you'd have to go into the street to get around them. You know damn well they weren't going to let you work in there but the war put us in there. Almost no women were there either, black or white. I started there taking up these dues. I don't know how I got into that.

I became a member of the board of directors of the NAACP. I was on the board of directors when Arthur Johnson came up from the country with dog manure on his shoes. They hired him. NAACP had such a low profile. When he came to town he couldn't find the NAACP but he found this committee because we had a higher profile.

We had this little left-wing group. One day, we were in the back yard at Brewster housing projects and this white fellow said to me "Ernie, they just passed this Diggs law about eating in these places. If the colored people don't start going into these places, that law is just going to rust on the books. It's going to get dust covered." I didn't know what he meant then. He was talking about the Michigan Accommodations Act. He made me aware of that, so what I began to do was figure out how you got something done about it. Eventually, I was able to get the NAACP, until Bradby

appointed me to the board and while I was on the board I started this committee to break down restaurants. In the process of breaking down restaurants, you just couldn't make a legal case unless you had some white folks with you. That is why I've had some experiences that give me a leg up on people who cry black. That's why in the United States the last thing blacks need to do is to go on a corner and start hollering Black! Black! Black! You cannot win. That's very unpopular these days. You can get elected and stay there for life but you can't do nothing. I learned that in the process. First of all it was a white guy who told me about the law. No black guy told me nothing about it. When we got ready to make a case, when you wanted a legal tight case, you had to have somebody who they had served under the same circumstances. You couldn't get nobody black because they weren't serving blacks. So we had white people do it.

I come home one day, still in Brewster and I had dinner and I went out and caught the streetcar and I rode all the way up to beyond the Boulevard. I got off and went into every place on the way back to downtown. Didn't a single one serve me. I was getting what you folks now call raw data. If I would ask for coffee they would say "we don't serve coffee." I'd put down the names. They would say "I'll serve you in the back" or "Do you want to take it out, we're closing." This was about in 49. If you remember the old days, they had all kind of nice little coffee shops. I went to every one of them.

I did this during the week. On Friday night I had called this meeting and I told the guys in the plant. I'd be telling them about what I'd been doing. They all showed up at the Y. The Y was segregated too. It was a black men's Y, Hutchinson. We rented it for 25 cents a night. I had all these guys come in here, and a friend of ours who's a lawyer, I had him come in and explain the law. I was the chairman, and my wife was there. He explained everything you should do. "You go in there, you comb your hair, you wear your tie and I don't care what the hell they do to you, you don't respond." We were ahead of King because this was 1947, 1948. "Just go in there and ask for coffee and I don't care what they do, don't respond. If they refuse you, you go call the police. When the police come, you tell them you think you should be served under the Michigan Equal Accommodations Act. You get the policemen badge number, in a very demonstrable way. You get that in such a way that it's buried in his mind and you put it down."

Do you remember the Old Detroiter hotel? It's a senior citizens house. When it was running full bloom, the Korean war was going on. We went into that place one time, we had about 5-6 of us. It had a cafeteria. When we went in there, everybody disappeared. We kept standing there and finally a guy came out and said he was the manager. Jess did her speech. He was saying "We just serve guests."

Jess said "How do you know we're not guests?" She went

into this speech. She said, "Our money's just like anybody else's and our boys died in the war," and so on.

He said "If you feel that way about it, I'll serve you myself, what do you want?" He was giving us too much potatoes, all kinds of gravy, no kidding. He served everybody. She was dropping the patriotic thing on him. The Korean thing was just ending and she said how would he feel if we had just come back from serving over there. "We're Americans, our money's just as good as anybody else's." For whatever reason, she really got to him. It was so funny. We sat right up in the front.

The reason you need a group is because, I noticed when I used to go in a place, the Professional Building, down at Peterboro. I went in there and they had a counter and they had tables. I went in there and she came up and said "Can I help you sir?" I said I'll have coffee and she said sir. After awhile she said "As soon as I get to you sir, but there's somebody ahead of you." I sat there and sat there and they just never came. Then we found out what we had to do. If you went to a table they'd do the same thing. They'd say they'd be right back and just never come back. So we put a black at every table. The white folks would come in and they'd go. Then what they started doing was closing up at 7:00 they'd say the place was closed. When we'd leave they'd reopen.