Norman McRae, historian, was born in Detroit in 1925. He served in the U.S. Navy during the last months of World War II. He graduated with an A.B. in English and M.A. in Education from Wayne State University and earned a doctorate in History from the University of Michigan. He has taught in the Detroit Public Schools and was head of the Social Studies Department where he retired in 1991. He has researched and written widely in the area of the black presence in the United States and is the author and co-author of several history textbooks.

1943.

NORMAN McRAE

I was born on September 25, 1925 in Detroit at Herman Keifer Hospital. My father was a waiter. He died in 1930 of TB. I still remember playing on the street, and my mother came from the Hastings streetcar line. When I ran up to her, she was crying. She said my father was dead. My father was from the rural part of Georgia. I found out that he ran away from home when he was about 12 years old. My mother used to nose around in his drawers and she found out that he had a family in Georgia. She took him home to bury him. We had to change trains a lot. Then we'd have to wait for the casket to be taken off and transferred. I can remember standng on the platform someplace in the south. It was about five in the morning. It was jet black. As we stood there I saw the dawn come up. We buried him and came back to Detroit.

My mother worked in Grosse Poine as a maid, and we stayed with relatives. I was such a problem kid. The summer of 1934 my mother sent me down to Birmingham, Alabama where she was born to stay with my aunts and uncle. When I was there, I received a letter that I was going to have a stepfather. So I came back, and we moved to Saginaw in September of 1934. We stayed there ten years.

I would come back to Detroit to visit relatives. I have an aunt, Mrs. Etta Morris, who was very instrumental in my life. She would buy me back-to-school stuff, and I would go back to Saginaw with part of Hudsons. She lived at 411 King. That was in the heart of the Black gold coast in the 40's The Bledsoe family were very dear friends of ours. They lived two doors from us. Mrs. Bledsoe had grown up with Paul Robeson, and she never lost faith in him like some people did. I can remember the only time I met him was when his star began to descend. There was a concert at the Detroit Institute of Arts and Mrs. Bledsoe took me back stage to meet him. As a young man my only Black heroes were Joe Louis and Paul Robeson.

I was in the Navy. I did my basic training at Great Lakes in Camp Lawrence. After that, because I scored high on the test, I went to Naval Training School at Hampton Institute. Once you walked out of those gates you were slapped in the face by the segregation laws of Virginia. That's what got you. You had to ride in the back of the streetcar. We used to go to a place called the Lee Theatre in Phoebus. We had to sit in the balcony. Some guys refused to do it. It was worse in the Army in the South. Any number of men were beaten up because they wouldn't go to the back of the bus or because they talked back to a sheriff.

One of the great ironies of World War II is that when we started taking German and Italian prisoners and bringing them to this country and putting them in various places, the prisoners had more rights than the black guys guarding them. They could go to the White PX. They could go to the White base movies. The Armed Forces is much different now because Truman enforced the desegregation of the branches of service.

I used to go to the Paradise. I can remember seeing Duke Ellington, the Bowser and.... They used to call these two guys, for a lack for lack of a better term, elite comedians. One guy was a straight man, the other guy set up the jokes. He had a saying, "What nature has forgotten, we fix with cotton."

There was a scene where this guy with a black face, it was makeup, had this very light-skinned wife. The only props on the stage were a bed, a table and two chairs. He said to his wife, "I'm going to work today. Don't you be holding that little baby boy cause he knows what it's all about. He's getting grown up too fast, then he leaves.

Then she says, "Hot dog! I'm glad he's gone. Now I can let my back door man, Sweet Papa Tim, come in."

So Sweet Papa Tim come in, and he says, "You know, baby, me and a couple other Jew boys were on the train going to Pontiac the other day, and I didn't know that there were two parts of the chicken."

She said, Baby there's the dark meat for the thighs and the white meat for the breasts."

Then he said, "Well, baby, come on and sit down on my dark meat, and put your head up on my white meat."

So it goes on like this for awhile. Then the husband slips back in and says, "I caught you. I caught you."

And then Sweet Papa Tim gets down on his knees and says,"Please don't shoot me cause I come from Pontiac." And then the husband lets him go.

And his wife starts running around the bed and he chases her with a gun, and she faints and falls on the bed and her dress comes up to just above her knees. The husband looks at her and puts his gun down and starts taking off his coat and shirt and says, "You know, baby, one of these days I'm gonna hurt you."

Then there was great laughter, and the lights go out on the stage.

On Mondays we used to go to a place called Lee's Sensation that was on the Northend. They used to have great blues singers like Alberta Adams. She'd sing this song, the punch line of them used to crack everybody up, "What makes my grandma love my grandpa so?" And she would repeat the line several times. Then the punch line would be, "He's got the same old stroke he had fifty years ago."

I remember going to the Valley, especially after I got out of the service. They had the Three Sixes, Sportrees, the Larks, 606 and others.

Let me tell you something that happened to me back in 1948 when I went to the El Sino. A guy came up to me and said, "Sir, could I

get you some weed?"

I said, "No, man, I never use the stuff."

He goes away and returns later, "Say, man you know I have some girls that you...."

I said, "No, thanks."

He said, "Shit! I can't do nothing for you, can I?" You always had those guys who were trying to make a dishonest buck, and you had some working girls working in places.

I can remember going to Sportrees to see the female impersonators.

Lark's was more of a bar. Lark's Bar and Grill. Some of them served food. I didn't get any food at the times I went. I was only interested in drinking beer.

When most people went down to the Valley, they dressed to the nines. They were sharp.

One of the nice things about Detroit was that a man with no skills and a strong back could come here and work. Eventually, if he got seniority he could count on a pretty decent income. If he didn't blow his money, he could have a home, and his kids could go to Wayne University and get a college education. Many a guys my age worked their way through college by working at Ford or other plants in the summer.