INTERVIEW OF GEORGE GAINES

Oral History Project of the Westsiders

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Interview Conducted by: Louis Jones

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Q Mr. Gaines, tell us about your parents, where they are from and how did they get to Detroit?

A My father was born in New Orleans in 1909. He was one of five kids. His family moved to Biloxi where my mother is from, Biloxi, Mississippi.

My mother was born in 1909 in Biloxi. My mother went to college. My father ended up going to Philadelphia, to be with his oldest sister, to finish high school in Philadelphia and he became a waiter.

My grandfather moved to Detroit after having lived in Chicago awhile. He brought all of his kids here. He worked in a Catholic orphanage around Burroughs and Woodward Avenue.

My uncles, everybody in my family worked around the restaurant business. My uncles, two of them ended up retiring from auto plants but they worked as hotel and restaurant workers.

My parents, my mother never worked. She worked at home. My father was a waiter and he felt that he could

provide for the family and he did not want my mother to work.

Q But you say that your mother did work for a minute.

A Well, she worked one Christmas at the post office. My father was very unhappy about it.

Q You were talking about how your parents came here.

A Well, my father went to work after finishing high school. My mother went to Alcorn College in Mississippi. My father worked in the hotel and restaurant business as did all of his brothers. My grandfather who was a chef cook moved to Detroit, and then the boys, my father and all of my uncles moved here, and they moved into this neighborhood.

Q What was it about Detroit that inspired them to come here as opposed to somewhere else or remaining in Philadelphia?

A I don't know. My understanding is that they moved to Chicago first and then they moved to Detroit. My grandfather worked in a Catholic orphanage down around Burroughs and Woodward during the depression. He was a chef cook for the orphanage. I don't even know if the building is still there, but I do remember going in to that building. All of my uncles and aunts lived in this neighborhood.

Q You don't know what it is about the West Side that made them move here as opposed to somewhere else in Detroit?

A I don't know why they moved here. I think the first person to move here was my aunt, though, and she lived on Ironwood near what was Awrey's Bakery. My father and my mother and myself and my sister who was born here in

Detroit lived in that house on Ironwood. Then we moved to an apartment on Hartford and Cobb. Then my father bought the house across the street. We grew up in the house across the street, 6040 Hartford which my sister and I still own.

Q What kind of work did your father do?

A My father was a waiter.

Q A waiter?

A Yes, he worked in the hotel and restaurant business as did his brothers.

Q Did he talk at all about what that experience was like working as a waiter?

A Oh, yes. Yes.

Q What kind of things did he say?

A Well, he was first of all, he was humble about it because he worked all during the depression. That was a rough period as well as his brothers and my grandfather who was a cook over at the Catholic orphanage. He was very humble about it.

He was a good waiter. He worked at the best places. He worked at the Detroit Club. He worked in the Whittier Hotel in 1930, when they had a nightclub there.

He got along really well with patrons. In later years he worked at a place called the Recess Club in the Fisher Building. He was very friendly with the members and customers. I think he even went fishing with them. He was really on with them. He was a very gregarious person, very

sports minded, knew all of the statistics of the baseball players. He even followed hockey. He followed the horses. He followed the horses seriously. I remember when I was a kid he used to talk about Sea Biscuit, he won money on Sea Biscuit and bought a car.

Q Was that unusual for the family to have a car then?

A Oh, yes, in 1937? He had a brand new 1937 Pontiac, from Sea Biscuit earnings.

Q What kind of places did you go in the car?

A We drove South in it. It was a trip from hell?

Q How so?

A Here was an African American driving a brand new 1937 green Pontiac through Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi. It was a mess. We had a lot of problems. I do not want to go into that. Some of them were very bad.

In terms of violence, it was bad news.

Here, it was all right. We were just an upper middle class African-American family. But driving that car South was a mistake.

Q Can you share any of those.

A Well, the one that I remember, I was a kid. We had driven South and my father, my other grandfather had a tailor shop. My father turned the corner and parked in front of the tailor shop. A guy sitting on the porch across the street saw my father blow the horn at a woman who was about to step off the curb. He blew the horn.

She stepped back and that guy came over there.

Q Now, talking about your father: Did your father talk about any hardships in the job?

A No, he was very positive about that. As a consequence, the people that he waited on would oftentimes call him and ask him to serve parties at their house. He would take me with him. We worked all over Grosse Pointe. He was a very gregarious person. They would say, Gaines, can you serve a party at my house on Sunday afternoon. He would grab me and we would go out there and make extra money.

As I said, he got along very well with the patrons. When he worked at the Recess club, I am very sure that he even went fishing with some of the patrons. He was a sportsman. He kept up with the statistics. He was a gregarious person. He had savoir faire.

He was a golfer. He was an international type person. He could get on with any kind of person.

Q I understand that he was a flyfisher as well?

A Fanatic fisher; fanatic golfer. Yes.

Q What drew him to those sports?

A I think it was the people that he worked around. He identified with the middle and upper class people that he worked for. He was an avid fisher and a golf fanatic; and really a sports fanatic. He would bet on everything.

Q And your mother, did she work?

A No, my mother was a homemaker. She never worked. She

did teach school in Mississippi but when she moved here she never worked. She worked in the home.

Q Why is that?

A My father did not want -- I mean it was a real traditional family. The man was the breadwinner and the woman was the homemaker. My father definitely did not want my mother to work. She got a job one time at the post office during Christmas and he was very unhappy about it.

Q How did he express that?

A He would take care of the house; he could take care of the house.

Q He let her know that he could do that?

A Yes.

Q Tell me about the block that you lived on?

A Well the block that I lived on had two apartment buildings, one built by a black numbers man by the name of Jim Stephens. That is the apartment that we lived in. That building is gone now. Then there was another apartment building in the middle of the block.

Almost all single homes, frame, really well kept up; some off them are kept upright now; very conscious of the lawns, and people were proud of their backyards. They planted flowers and stuff like that. It was a really nice block and coherent. Everybody knew everybody. All of my buddies lived on that block. My sister's friends lived on that block, generally.

Q What was the relationship like between your family and you, more specifically, and the neighbors?

A Very positive, very positive. My mother belonged to a club called Entre Nous which was basically made up of women who were homemakers, who lived in this neighborhood. They probably used this club for their bridge clubs and bridge parties and stuff.

It was a very close knit block; very coherent. I don't remember any conflict.

Q You mentioned the club, Entre Nous?

A That is one of the things as I learn more and more about the West Side, a lot of people joined clubs?

A And still do.

Q Still do; okay? Were there other kind of clubs that either your father or your mother may have been members of?

A My mother was very active with Entre Nous for years and years and years. It was basically a woman's club and I think mostly homemakers.

My father was a Mason and he was a member of this [i.e., the Nacirema] club. He was very active with this club. He was a Mason and he was active with the Nacirema Club, and basically the Nacirema Club was his social activity.

Q Okay. Entre Nous, now what did that club do?

A It was a social club of women.

Q Where did they meet?

A They met at different people's homes and each member had to host the membership meeting, and had to provide food, tea, and stuff like that. It was, it was like you get that like every couple of years, it would be your turn to host or hostess the meeting. That was a big deal in the house, to prep for it for weeks.

Q Oh, really.

A Yes.

Q Mr. Gaines, what kind of rules and routines did your family have for you as kids?

A Basically, you are home by the time the street lights come on.

You have heard that before?

Q Yes, I have.

A That was definitely their rule. I was a wanderer as well as were the guys I grew up with. Saturday we would take-off and we would be gone all day, and it really upset my parents. We would be in the street all day. We would go to the railroad tracks and catch freights and ride them across town, catch a freight and ride back, stuff like that. That was all day Saturday and my parents were really upset about it. Finally they moved in on me. My mother figured out a way to keep me home.

Q What did she do to keep you home?

A Well, my buddy down the street, his mother borrowed a skirt from my mother, and put it on him, and said okay, now, let me see if you leave the block. So my mother got the idea

and put a skirt on me. If the two of us had to wear skirts, we are not going anywhere. So finally Sam and I said, look, we got to deal with it and we went back in the alley and played baseball in the skirts, but we didn't wander any more; that was too much.

Q You played baseball in the alley with a skirt on?

A Yes, both of us. Sam, the late Sam Pool, was a great baseball player. As a matter of fact he signed with the Chicago Cubs and had an unfortunate thing happen, he broke his leg the summer before he was supposed to start. He never, never made the team. He was an excellent baseball player. We would play with the skirts on, but didn't challenge anyone to deal with us on the skirt. That was supposed to keep us from wandering. We were really street kids. Down to Michigan Avenue, catch the freights, go to the slaughter house and stuff like that. Just adventurous sort of stuff.

Q That is a little unusual whenever I speak to folks about the West Side, their parents were pretty strict not only remaining at home but some of them could only remain right in front of the house?

A Yep. Yes, that is the way it was. But we, we guys, we were adventurous. We would go, I mean the big thing was to go to the railroad and catch freights or to go down to the foot of West Grand Boulevard and swim off the docks there, where the fire boat is and was.

Q You had chores that you had to do?

A Yes.

My basic responsibility was the lawn and the dishes, my

sister and I. We definitely had chores; definitely had chores.

Q Tell us a little bit about school for you. You went to Wingert?

A I went to Wingert.

Q Any special memories?

A Wingert: I have really fond memories of Wingert. There were really dedicated teachers. Basically now that I think back on it, we are talking 1937, 1936, 1938, basically the teachers were socialists, I am sure. They were all white, they were very liberal and very dedicated to the education of those kids, dedicated to the education of those kids. The principal had been in the Army during World War II. He occasionally would come to the school with his uniform on, very liberal. It was a very liberal school in terms of social policy. It was integrated, in a sense, because across the street from the school was what was known as the German orphanage. The kids from the German orphanage came, walked across the street to Wingert and went to school there. It was integrated by the kids from the orphanage. The white kids that lived on West Grand Boulevard did not go to Wingert. They went to Marr, which was up on Grand River right behind Northwestern High School. But the kids from the German orphanage went to Wingert School. So it was an integrated school in that sense. They were very dedicated teachers. They were sensitive teachers. I do remember that.

Q How did that come out, I mean the dedication, the socialist kind of mentality?

A It was kind of a liberal mentality in terms of poverty and behavior. I mean it is kind of hard to express, but I am sure that many of those instructors were socialist. I mean,

something in my gut just tells me that. They were very, very liberal white instructors.

Q Do you have any particular memories about any particular teacher or counselor?

A Oh, yes. Oh, yes, I do. There was one African-American teacher who taught art, and she took a real liking to me. I had problems. I had learning problems. I think I am dyslexic, I didn't know it at the time. She would pull me out of class and take me into the art room and really almost do art therapy with me. I remember that. Miss Baker, I remember that.

I remember this woman Miss Burch who was a social studies teacher and anybody you talk to in this group will remember Miss Burch because she was such a liberal person, very dedicated. She believed that you could learn and she would test you, she would challenge you to be your best.

Q How would she challenge you?

A She was strict. She was strict and she expected you to learn. It wasn't anything cynical about her at all in terms of your learning. She expected you to learn. She thought that you could learn just like anybody else and she expected that.

As you interview people you ask them about Miss Burch everybody will remember her because she was such a dedicated teacher.

Q From Wingert you were in military school; is that correct?

A No, actually I went to St. Benedict The Moor, boarding school in Milwaukee, which does not exist now. It was run by

Adrian Michigan nuns and Francisans fathers. I went there for the 7th grade, 8th grade and 9th grade. Then I went to Northwestern; but they got me out of Detroit just in time.

Q Why is that?

A Well, you know, I probably would be dead if I had not gone to St. Benedict. All of the guys that I grew up with ended up overdosing on drugs, everybody that I, with the exception of Sam Pool that I mentioned. Almost all of those guys ended up victims of the 1946 heroin epidemic. Right after the war, heroin hit this neighborhood. It ran through this neighborhood just like wild fires. Most of the people didn't know; they used it; they didn't know it was addictive. By the time they knew it was addictive, they were addicted. I was out of here. I was in Milwaukee. I missed it. I missed that epidemic.

Q You know I have not heard anybody talk about that before.

A Basically I am a public health person, as you know, and I pretty much have followed the heroin epidemic that hit this neighborhood in 1946. I kind of traced it back to actually the person who had the heroin. It was the guy that sold marijuana. The story is that he sold marijuana and the guys that he got the marijuana from were Italian and they gave him some heroin and they put it in, and they said, see if your customers like this. That was basically the start of the heroin epidemic.

Q Who was he?

A I won't name his name.

Q Okay.

A He may still be living. I pretty much traced the epidemic to that one person. That is not uncommon. Meyer Lansky, the famous mafia person is credited with starting a cocaine epidemic on the East Side of New York. One person, he was just one person that pretty much infected his neighborhood.

Q How did that change the neighborhood?

A It was devastating because now we are starting to talk about break-ins. We are starting to talk about people addicted. We are starting to talk about people stealing from their neighbors. We are talking about overdose deaths. We are talking about deaths from hepatitis. The heroin epidemic ran through this neighborhood. Like I said, I was away, so I missed it. I probably would have, because these were all of my peers and basically one of my problems was that I wanted to be one of the boys. So naturally if that was what they were doing, I was with them. I wasn't a leader in that regard. They all ended up dead. I am talking about twenty or thirty people who were all my peers. Suesetta knows about it. She is a health person, and she knows about it.

Q You know one of the things I often hear people talk about the West Side, maybe this was a slightly different era, it was extremely safe. People left their doors open.

A Yes.

Q But it sounds like at least during '46 and after that it wasn't really all that safe.

A No, the heroin epidemic definitely affected that; definitely affected that, in terms of personal robberies and that sort of thing.

Q So you come back from Milwaukee and you go to

Northwestern?

A Yes, I went to Northwestern.

Q Tell us about that experience at Northwestern?

A Well, Northwestern by the way, by this time was a pretty well integrated school. It had very, very strong emphasis on sports, athletics. It was made up of many students who were probably college bound, Jewish kids, Italian kids, and black American kids who were going to go to college. Basically college prep was the theme at the school as opposed to a trade school situation. I got through Northwestern by going to summer school every summer. By now my sister had caught up with me. She is three years younger. She and I would have graduated in the same class if I had not gone to summer school.

I didn't want to graduate in the same class with my sister. She was three years younger. So it was always summer school every summer. I graduated in January and she graduated in June. I had failed in grade school a couple of times. I had a rough time in grade school. St. Benedict the Moor is probably the best thing that happened for me. I had a lot of respect for the Adrian Dominician nuns.

Q This is your experience in Milwaukee?

A Yes.

Q And then you get to Northwestern?

A I am little better prepared for school. In boarding school you have homework and small classes. It was a private school and they are really emphasizing get your parent's money's worth. So that helped me to get through

Northwestern.

Q I hear mixed things about Northwestern. On the one hand there are some teachers and counselors that are very supportive?

A Yes.

Q And then some that are not particularly supportive. They teach you like they teach everybody else, and are not particularly supportive and even discouraged some college prep courses?

A Yes. Absolutely. Keep in mind that Northwestern at the time, and the people you are interviewing were very much in transition, in terms of its racial composition. It was moving from a school that was "integrated" to a school that was going to be predominately African American. That is how it was moving. African Americans in 1946, I think it was, in 1947 moved across Tireman Avenue which up to that time had been an all white community under what is known as restricted covenant. Are you familiar with that?

Q Yes.

A The McGee family went to the Supreme Court, and the Supreme Court ruled out the restrictive covenant and then African Americans began to move across Tireman. Those were all students that would eventually go to Northwestern. Northwestern ended up being almost a predominately black school. But at the time I was there there had never been even a president of the graduating class that was African American. I think the first African-American president was a basketball player by the name of Duke Foster, who was a very good all-city basketball player. It was an integrated high school and it had a lot of tension. There

was a lot of tension there in terms of some teachers being very supportive and some teachers steering some African-American students like myself toward trade schools as opposed to not thinking they would go to college. My parents had to go over and get with the counselors to indicate that they expected me to go to college. They expected me to go to college. I didn't expect to go to college. They wanted me to go into a non-college prep track. The counselors wanted me to go into a non-college prep track. I didn't really know the difference between the two. Northwestern was definitely a crisis situation as it moved from an "integrated school" to almost a predominately African-American students, and that happened quick.

Q I am told like in the earlier years blacks couldn't join different clubs, couldn't go to the prom.

A I don't know about the prom. For example, there is a mental health center on the corner of Dexter and West Grand Boulevard. That was a YMCA. The Y-Teens met there. You couldn't go in there. If they went in there they would call the police on you. It was basically a white YMCA. That was like a defining situation there. Anything north of West Grand Boulevard was basically white. Anything south of it was African American. That Y set there in that strategic place. The Y-Teens was the white club.

My sister and her girlfriend integrated the cheerleading team. Northwestern was really in transition when we were students there.

Q Did she talk about that experience?

A Oh, yes, she talked about it.

Q What was it like for her?

A She talked about it. It worked out good. She made friends with the cheerleaders, she and her buddy. I hadn't even remembered that my sister Betty and June Bonner integrated the cheerleading team at Northwestern.

Q Do you recall any resistance that she had as she was about to join?

A She talked about it. That is an interesting thing, it was a presumption that you belonged. It was a real presumption. It is there, hey, I am going. A real presumption.

Q Was your family a church going family?

A Yes.

Q What church did you guys belong to?

A It was split up. I went to the Catholic Church, St. Benedict the Moor on Beechwood. My sister did too. My parents went to St. Cyprian's right up the street or St. Stephens. Part of my family was Catholic, part of my family was Protestant. My aunts convinced me to go to the Catholic church. So I went to the Catholic church, St. Benedict the Moor which is no longer there.

Q I understand there was a priest named Capp and one named Diehl, do you remember them.

A Yes, I remember very well.

Q What do you remember about him?

A He was a very, very progressive person; very committed to

an African-American membership, real integrated in to the community, opened the school, I keep saying the school, opened the church basement to parties, very positive situation. Father Diehl was a very positive person.

Q Were you active in the church?

A Yes, I was.

Q In what capacity?

A My job was to -- he had a dog. My job was to go there once a week and give the dog a bath. My aunt worked in the church house. So, I was close. My sister got married in that church. My cousins who lived up the street from there went to that church. My cousin was an altar boy there. We were pretty well integrated in to that church.

Q And it was predominately a black church?

A Yes, it was a black church. There was a white Polish church across Warren and they would come because we had the 12:00 Mass. If you looked at the 12:00 Mass it looked like an integrated situation.

Q How was that given that, well, it was integrated?

A Yes.

Q So what was the relationship like between the black parishioners and the white parishioners?

A The church was basically black. The white parishioners belonged to the Polish Catholic church. They were there for the convenience of the 12:00 Mass, and Father Diehl was very resentful of that. He didn't like that.

Q How did he express that?

A He expressed it from the pulpit.

Q What kind of things did he say?

A "You people". Why don't you people go to your church. He was very forthright about it.

Q All right. Okay. Tell us about this club, the Nacirema Club. How did it come to be founded, what was the motivation for its founding?

A Well, you see the charter there. The club was formed in like 1922 of men who lived basically in this area. In 1925 they bought this building, the part from here to the door there. The rest of what you saw down there where the bar is was added during the war. This was basically the house until 1945, 1946. It was generally fathers and sons. It was an all male club at that time. If your father belonged you were expected to belong. They had a youth group. They had basketball teams, baseball teams with the Nacirema logo on it, et cetera. They were very active.

Once a year they would have Nacirema Week. They would have a boat ride, golf match, they would have parties here. This was basically the social center for this neighborhood. Many of the people you talked about would have their graduation party here, their wedding reception here. My parents had their 50th wedding anniversary here. My sister's wedding reception was here. Basically this was the social center for this neighborhood. Even though people belonged from all around the city, but it was basically this neighborhood. Like I said it has been here since 1924. When I became the president three years ago --

Q We actually interviewed Juanita Rosario Diggs.

A She lived right across the street from the church.

Q She talked about Father Diehl and Father Capp.

A I didn't know Father Capp. I knew Father Diehl.

Q Okay. He was a very outgoing kind of guy, Father Diehl as how she described Father Diehl.

A Juanita and I were classmates.

Q Now back to the Nacirema Club.

A Yes.

Q Do you recall or did your father talk about like what motivated them to build and establish this in the first place?

A No, you know, you are talking between a 1922 club, 1924 buying the place, you are talking about a neighborhood that was being populated by men who had been in World War II, who had come home from the war and were buying homes in this area. Many of them ended up being the members of this club. There were former soldiers from World War II. For example, you interviewed Horace Jefferson, his father who was a big member here, active bridge player here, had been in World War II, and his membership goes back to the 20s. So basically the club was like, you know, it was pretty well expected that if your father was a member then you would be a member.

Q You said there was a youth group?

A There was a youth group. I was a member of it. I don't

know if you have interviewed Russell Talbert, his father was a member. I don't know if you have interviewed Horace Rogers, his father was a member. They are still members.

Q What things would the youth group do?

A Like I said, they had basketball teams and baseball teams.

Q Who would you play?

A Other clubs.

Q There were clubs around the city?

A Yes.

Q What kind of clubs?

A Well, there were baseball teams like AAA. Northwestern Field had about eight baseball diamonds up there, and all day Sunday one game right after another from clubs. Pepsi Cola would sponsor a team. Nacirema sponsored a baseball team. The trophies that you saw down there on the bar come from their activity as basketball and baseball teams. The basketball teams played on Sunday at Brewster Center. It was club day all day Sunday, one team after another from various clubs. Michigan Chronicle had a team. Nacirema had a team, et cetera.

Q I am jumping around here, but you reminded me when you started talking about sports that you are a cross country track runner at Northwestern?

A Yes.

Q Tell us about that experience being on the team there and

being a cross country track person as opposed to some other sport?

A I told you I had gone to St. Benedict the Moor. St. Benedict the Moor was a big sports school, and I ran track there. I tried to play football there. I came to Northwestern and I went out for the football team and I am weighing about one hundred ten pounds. I could see right away that that wasn't going to work out. I saw guys run around Northwestern Field. I asked somebody, I said what is that? The guy said that is the cross country team. What do they run? They run cross country; they run two miles. So I turned in my football stuff and joined the cross country team. For three years in a row we were city champions. We won the West Side and we won the city. That is when it was two miles at Palmer Park, it is now five thousand meters, three point one miles. But we won three years in a row. They had a really good cross country team. The guys who ran cross country ended up being good milers, quarter milers, and all of them ended up being all-city.

Q Can you tell us a little bit about the depression?

A What I remember about the depression…My grandfather as I indicated was a chef cook. What he would do, he would buy in bulk for the orphanage that he cooked for. He would also buy for his family. My uncles who lived in this neighborhood would all come to my father's apartment on Sunday afternoon, and he would distribute the food. Take this sugar, take this flour, take this bacon to the brother's: my uncle Charlie, my uncle Robert, my uncle Oscar, and they would split it up. My father as I said worked all during the depression. But he would buy in bulk for the family and distribute it to the three brothers. We would keep the families going. Very, very conscious, it was a very close knit family;

my grandfather being the patriarch.

It was rough during the depression. I remember the big deal of whether you got welfare shoes or not. Whether you got, what is that, the Old Newsboys, they still do it. They sell newspapers and at Christmas time they give kids packages and during the depression it was whether you got a package from the Old Newsboys or not. It was rough. I remember that it was not really a fluent time. I am talking 1936, '37, 1939, it was tight. It was tight. Even though many of the people in this neighborhood worked in plants. They worked at the Rouge. They worked at Kelsey Hayes Plant, which was on McGraw. They worked at the Lincoln Plant, which is on Livernois. During the depression there wasn't a lot of work. I remember it was rough. It seemed like it was cold, too.

Q You said it was rough, some people were doing okay, and some people weren't?

A Absolutely.

Q Some people felt maybe ashamed and embarrassed about it?

A Yes; yes.

Q How did that come out?

A Yes. The Goodfellows, the things that the Goodfellows gave were very identifiable. They would buy shoes in bulk. They would buy socks in bulk, and it would be identifiable to people. That would distinguish you as a person who was having a hard time because you got the Goodfellow shoes and the Goodfellow socks and the Goodfellow shirts. They would buy them as a whole package and then distribute them to everybody. There was that

distinction. I am talking about at Wingert, Wingert Grade School. I have friends now who talk about looking forward to the Goodfellow packages.

At Christmas time they would give dolls to the girls and toys to the boys, et cetera. There are people who are doing real well now, who remember the Goodfellow packages.

Q One of the things that pretty clearly changed the situation from the depression was World War II. What do you recall about the war?

A What I do recall about the war? First of all, I remember my father going to work like this everyday. He wore a shirt and tie everyday because he was a waiter. When he would get there, he would put on the uniform. During the war, he had to give up that job and take a war time job. He went to work at Ford Motor Company. He started to wear overalls and jackets and stuff. So I remember the change. I remember from my father, I used to watch him when he got dressed. I would watch him tying his tie because he was very clothes conscious. Then I would see him going to work in the overalls and blue jeans and stuff. It was a change. It was required because he was eligible for the draft. So he took a war job and he worked at the Ford Rouge with everybody else around here who worked at the Ford Rouge. Everybody I know you have interviewed, probably including myself worked at the Ford Rouge at one time. I worked at the Ford Rouge.

Q What kind of work did you do at the Ford Rouge?

A Worked on the line at the Rouge. Everybody I know from this neighborhood worked at the Rouge.

Q When your father worked there, did he talk about what

that experience was like for him?

A Oh, yes. That was completely different for him. He was going to work, working out in the cold, coming home dirty and that was completely different for him. But as soon as the war was over, he went back to his original work.

Q What was that like for you working in the Rouge?

A Ford came up to Northwestern High School and passed out slips for anybody that wanted to go to Ford Trade School. So I took one of the slips and then I went over to the Ford on the brick one time. I said, when will I become an electrician? Well, there is a waiting list of a couple years. I worked that summer, I went back to high school. So I went back to high school and I worked at Ford again when I was in college.

Q Now were either you or your father a part of the union?

A Oh, yes, absolutely.

Q Well, tell us about the union?

A Well, I remember very distinctly when I worked at Ford that there was a union election. This guy by the name of -- and anybody who worked at Ford will remember, Carl Stellato was running for union president of Local 600. Local 600 is a powerful union. I remember guys passing out stuff. I didn't know from nothing. Guys were passing out stuff for Carl Stellato. I think he ended up becoming president of Local 600, which was a real strong union. I mean that is the Battle of the Overpass, the sitdown strike, the whole business. And so I do remember it was very, very union conscious. I was only there long enough to work and not even get into the union. By the time it was time for me to get in to the union,

90 days, you got to join the union, I was back in high school.

The experience was, look, I don't want to do this the rest of my life. I am going to college. That is really what made me decide I am definitely going to college. I do not want to work in the plant. It is too dirty. It is too noisy. It is too dangerous. So I went back to high school, finished high school, and then went to college.

Q Tell us about Joe Louis?

A My father knew him. He was a golfer, and my father was a golfer. He put on a golf match every year. He put on a golf tournament every year. So my father knew him, from being a fanatical golfer. He had a country club called Joe Louis' Farm, where they had horses. We would go there for Sunday dinner, during the war. We would go out there on Sunday and have dinner and watch the horse shows. What I remember about it was he was an avid golfer. He was a fanatical golfer as was my father. So that is how I knew Joe Louis through the Joe Louis Farm or county club, and the golf tournament that he put on at Rackham every year.

Q Did you listen to the fights?

A Oh, God, yes; listen to them, yes. I don't know if it was Joe Louis. We were like one of the first families that had a television. I remember people standing on the front porch looking through the window at the television fight. This is before they were completely popular, so we are talking what, maybe '47. I don't know if he was still fighting. I do remember that people would come and stand on the porch and watch the fight until television became popular.

Q Before that you would you listen to the fights on the radio?

A Oh, yes listen to the fights on radio and watch it on television and see the difference. It was like two different fights. Everyone would notice that, you know, the embellishment that the radio announcers made to the fights. If you are looking at it on televison, you would say what fight are they talking about?

Q What kind of social activities did the family do? Did the family do things together as a family?

A Yes, the big thing for the family was Nacirema Week. That was like the boat ride, the golf match, the Nacirema picnic and the parties and stuff that they had here. That was a really big deal for this neighborhood and for this club.

My family's social life was basically centered around this club, as was Suesetta's. This is where the women would give - the room I showed you upstairs, The Westsider's Room, the Tommy Tyler Room, they would give their bridge parties. As I said earlier this was the center of social activity for the neighborhood. So it was for us, too. Kids could come here not in the bar, but in this section and have club meetings and stuff like that. It was open to member's kids.

Q Tell us about Milford Street. It is my sense that it was a fairly bustling street. Tell us about Saturday morning on Milford Street?

A This is a very unusual situation. I am going to give you a write-up about it before you leave. Starting at West Grand Boulevard and running to Epworth on both sides of the street were businesses. I mean cleaners, shoe shops, drygood stores, ice cream parlors, hardware, theatre, et cetera. There is a fish market, poultry market, ice cream parlor, hardware, shoe store: Where you could buy shoes, where you could

get your shoes repaired, dime store, 5 & 10 cent store it was called, supermarket. It was a very bustling business section, nothing like it is now. There is one store on West Grand Boulevard, and that is it. There are no more stores on this street. I am talking all the way from Epworth to West Grand Boulevard.

Q When did things start to change from being bustling to --

A I don't know. See I went away to the Army, 1953 during the Korean War, and I came back, it was all over for Milford Street. Shops were gone or boarded up. This club advocated to tear down the last store because it was open to the public and there was garbage and stuff in it. We went to the City Council and got it torn down. It had been a shoe store, and a shoe repair store. It was sitting there just wide open. I think it was during the Korean War and right after integration of the downtown hotels and clubs - situation changed.

Q You know people talk about segregation in such negative terms, it wasn't good, but --

A Yes.

Q But you say segregation had some silver lining to it, almost it sounds like.

A I am not sure I would put it that way. I think we…I think African Americans missed the point, at least in Detroit. I don't know if it is the same in the South, it may be different in the South. I hear it may be different in Atlanta. Our idea was if it is integrated, then it is good. So, if it is not integrated, it is not good. I am not sure that that is what really people had in mind in terms of civil rights. That you give-up everything and go into an integrated situation. For example, during the early days, this is where you would go for a wedding or

reception. You would not go to a downtown hotel. It wouldn't be available to you. So, now that you can go to a downtown hotel what do you do you abandon the place that you originally had to go to? It seems to me that is what really happened. So once integration occurred people began to go to places where they hadn't been perfectly welcomed before and that was "theirs" kind of go by the board. So I don't think that is what the civil rights movement was really about. This is really just my opinion. Of course in public accomodations, buses and schools, et cetera, that was needed, but we started going downtown and this club was obsolete basically.

Q Even with that it sounds like there was something about the West Side and I continue to hear this, a little bit, it was something about the West Side that people maintain bounds over the years.

Let me ask you about the event just this past weekend, at the Yacht Club, what was that like?

A Packed. I don't know how many, a couple hundred people, most of the people I know from high school or grade school. This is the tenth anniversary of the Westsider's Club. The Westsiders gave this club twenty-three hundred dollars to fix the Tommy Tyler Room and dedicate it. We refurbished that room with their money. They gave a fund raiser here, raised three thousand dollars right in this room.

The Milford Street Gang meets here every first Wednesday. That is the picture that is up on the mantle piece there, they come here and have lunch.

The Sampson School has a reunion. They come here. Wingert School has a reunion. They come here. These folks kind of hang on to this neighborhood in terms of

reunions.

Milford Street Gang gives a Christmas Party every year. Everybody that is well and not on a walker, shows up. Every first Wednesday, they come here and have lunch, catered lunch.

As I indicated we are doing Jazz here every first Sunday. People come back hear live jazz every first Sunday. We have to have somebody watch the cars, but they come back here.

Q What is it about the West Side, though, that resulted in these continuing relationships?

A I don't know, the relationships continue. This group that was at the Yacht Club Sunday, everybody knows everybody. But basically they went to Northwestern or Chadsey or Cass and they maintain their relationships, with people who went to school with them. They are upwardly mobile, but they still remember when this club was the place where they had to come. As I said, the Milford Street Gang comes here every first Wednesday and have lunch. The Westsiders Club continue to support, all of our new membership has come from the Westsiders Club. Now we have women, all of our new membership has come from out of the Westsiders Club.

Q You talked about upwardly mobile folks these days. What was it about the West Side that resulted in people becoming successful in the way that we know them to be successful now?

A My understanding is and there is some disagreement about that, Sampson School which I did not go to was an excellent, no question about it being an excellent

school. Even though I would say Wingert was an excellent school, but Sampson turned out doctors, lawyers and dentists, and social workers. It was like if you went to Sampson you would be in a track towards college mobility. A lot of the people who went to Sampson ended up being very prominent physicians, lawyers, et cetera. Wingert to some extent but I don't think to the extent as Sampson. I think or my opinion is that Sampson was better academically and Wingert was better socially in terms of getting on savoir faire, how to get on, how to behave where Sampson was outstanding in terms of academics. A lot of judges, the Circuit Court Judge from Detroit went to Sampson and went to Northwestern. So it was an area where going to college was really expected. The paper I will give you, it says the neighborhood in a sense was a victim of its own successes, because once people went to school they moved away. In other words, you grow up here, you went to school here, you were successful here and when you got successful then you move away. I guess that happens in most neighborhoods, but it is very, very dramatic in this neighborhood. This neighborhood is not at all like it was when I grew up in it. But the people who lived in the neighborhood, went to school, went to college, became professionals and moved away. So that is why we have the neighborhood the way it is now.

Q Quickly your own success, you became a very high ranking official in the city government here. Tell us what you did and how you got from being a West Sider, from growing up on the West Side to the position that you held ultimately?

A Really it started at Northwestern. Because I was a runner, because I was All City I got scholarships to college to Adrian College first and then to Wayne State and so that helped me get through college. Once I got through college, I went in the army. I came back. I got a professional job as a social

worker. Then I went to the School of Social Work and got a master's in social work. I was working as a program planner for the medical school. And then I got a job working at Wayne County Community College putting together a program. Coleman tapped on me and said he wanted me to be the deputy director of health. I had known Coleman all the way back to college days. I knew him when I was in college. My buddy said, "look, Coleman wants you to be in the health department." I said, "look I am on the track to become a dean." He said, "look when the mayor asks you to do something, you got to do it." So I took a leave of absence expecting to be there four or five years. I ended up there for nineteen years -- the whole time that he was mayor. I ran the health department. Basically, I was the operations person. I was deputy director of the health department. I ran the department. When somebody would leave as director, I would run the department. They would get another director, and then he would leave. I would run the department again. So, basically it started with being able to run and getting a scholarship to college, to Adrian and to Wayne and becoming a social worker and getting a master's in public health.

Q Were you at that meeting where your parents came to school to speak to the counselor?

A Yes.

Q What do you remember about that meeting?

A I remember my parents being very forthright that they expected me to go to college, that I needed to be in a college curriculum as opposed to a general curriculum or a trade curriculum. The counselor would say he is not college material. They said, well, he is going to go to college. This is

not me saying it, this is them saying it. So I ended up on the college track and getting through high school going to summer school every summer to get caught up for the two or three times that I flunked in grade school. I graduated in 1949. I went to Adrian College for a year, transferred to Wayne on a track scholarship and ran track for Wayne and went in to the Army.

Q Any particular memory about Coleman Young?

A He was a great person to work for, genius with political instincts, a real fighter, very honest person. If he would have been a thief he would have gone to jail, because they were on him. He never took anything; so he didn't have to worry about that. I loved working for him. You work for him, you do your job he didn't bother you. He was a hard worker. He had a different schedule. He probably worked until 10 or 12 or 1 in the morning.

I remember being at Herman Kiefer one time at 7:00 o'clock in the evening. The phone rang. Coleman said, George, I want to ask you about something. I said, it is 7 o'clock at night. What makes you think I am here. I just happened to be there. Somebody told me later that it was a good thing I was there. He was a hard worker, good person, had great political instincts. I remember because of the heroin epidemic and the epidemic of HIV, I went to Coleman and told Coleman, I said look “we got forty thousand addicts in Detroit. If we don't do something this neighborhood is going to be devastated with HIV.” He said, “how are they going to get it?” I said, “they share needles.” He said, “give them the needles.” I said, “you can't give them the needles; it is against the law.” He said, “you got to do something.” What we did was until we got the needle exchange program, we gave out bottles of bleach so that the addicts could clean

their needles. We showed them how to clean their needles. In a sense I am sure that that made some difference here. Because it got to be a pattern that you just don't clean the needle with water, you use a bleach. Coleman said, give them the needles. They ought to have the needles. I said, “you can't do it; it is against the law.” We finally got the law changed, the ordinance changed. He was a progressive person to work for; that is the kind of person he was. “There are addicts; they need needles. They are going to share; give them the needles.” That is the way he thought. He is a great person to work for.

Q Now the Nacirema Club, American spelled backwards. How did they come up with that name?

A I don't know. That name goes back to 1922.

Everybody in the neighborhood knows that it is American spelled backwards. I do not know the origin. We are talking 1922. I guess you have to get into the history at the time of the Harlem Renaissance.

By the way, the new book *The Ark of Justice*. The doctor was a member of this club.

Q I didn't know that: Ossian Sweet?

A Yes.

He is also a Kappa.

Q Okay. How did he come to join this club when he lived all the way over there?

A I don't know. I don't know. He was a member of the

Nacirema Club and he was a Kappa.

Q Last question: The Milford Street Gang, how did that club or that group, how did it form?

A A friend of mine who lived right across the street, Larry Blaine called us and said, let's have lunch together. We had lunch at the Carl's Chop House a couple of times.

He said, we ought to have lunch every month.

I said, we ought to have it at the Nacriema. So that is how it started. That was the beginning of the Milford Street Gang.

Q How would you become a member of the Milford Street Gang?

A I don't know. You just show up. No dues. It is basically a very loose knit group with the membership. You saw a picture there. It is run by four or five people who are volunteers; that is it.